

*A Dutiful
Bride for the
Jealous Rancher*
**FELICITY
WELLS**

A Dutiful Bride for the Jealous Rancher

A Clean Western Historical Romance Novel

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Chapter 1

A Thank You To My Reader

Copyright

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Cynthia Rollins took a deep breath and let it out slowly, lacing up her nicest shoes and getting herself ready.

The shoes were snug, but Cynthia was tall for her thirteen years and her feet had grown in proportion. There wasn't money for a new pair any time soon; it was simply something she would have to accept.

She missed her father, with his bright, blue eyes that she had inherited from him, along with the dark brown hair. He had told her just a few weeks ago that he would make an effort to get her some new clothing that would fit her better, now that she was growing into a young woman.

Cynthia had smiled, proud that her father viewed her in such a way. She really did try to be just that, to make him happy.

But that was before they knew his heart was struggling to make it through each day.

That was before they were aware of the fact that he was just days from clutching his chest and letting out a cry of pain, sweat covering his brow, and a final gasp warning them that everything about their family was about to change.

Since then, Linda May had worn her black grief in the form of a widow's veil. She looked at her son, Nathan—just five years of age, the child of Linda's first husband—with love and adoration.

Then, she would glance at Cynthia with the face of obligation, of exhaustion.

In just two weeks, Cynthia had gone from a beloved daughter to the child in the way, the burden.

And when Linda May came out from helping Nathan get dressed, she looked at Cynthia with pursed lips and that *what to do with you?* expression she had been wearing all the time lately.

“Oh, there you are. You’re ready?” Linda May asked, adjusting her fine hat with the black mesh falling over her face in a cascade, while looking in the mirror she kept near the door.

Although their family had never been wealthy, they could afford to have a few nice things, and this mirror was rather ornately framed compared to some of the other things around the small home.

“I am. Are we going to the bakery?” Cynthia asked in reply. She loved any chance she had to go out and enjoy the day.

Being stuck at home was always difficult and since the death of her father, she had barely been allowed to leave for any reason. All she wanted was a chance to go out and try to forget the weight on her shoulders.

But Linda May simply sighed deeply and turned to her, those lips pursing again as she continued tucking her blonde locks under the brim of the hat. Her face was oddly youthful in comparison to the thin, crepe-like skin of her hands.

“Nathan and I are going to the bakery. You will not be joining us. I can’t watch the both of you,” she said with that faint hint of Irish brogue Cynthia had grown accustomed to.

Linda May’s mother and father had come to America before she was even born. Still, Linda May had retained hints of the accent used in her home growing up—quite different from Cynthia’s father, whose

family had been ranchers out west.

“I can help you with Nathan. You won’t have to watch me at all. I’ll be your helper, not a hindrance,” Cynthia said, tilting her youthful face to look up at Linda May with hope.

She didn’t want to be left behind or ignored. Aside from Nathan and Linda May, she had no real family left.

“You won’t do any such thing. I already told you that you need to stay with Miss Beattie. She’s the one who’s going to look after you,” Linda May said.

“But Miss Beattie must be busy with other things. Shouldn’t you just take me with you so I can look after Nathan? It’s no trouble. I’ll be good and I’ll be helpful,” Cynthia insisted.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Linda May demanded, her tone harsh and full of frustration. “I already told you that you’re to stay with Joyce.

“I don’t need you coming with us and getting in the way. I know that your father...”

Linda May stopped and took a deep breath to calm herself. Cynthia read it in the woman’s face: she wished Cynthia wasn’t there, that she would just go away and not bother them anymore.

Cynthia, however, couldn’t help that she was around. She hadn’t asked for this, either. She didn’t want to be with Linda May.

Sure, Nathan was a nice little boy, but he wasn’t her brother, and Linda May didn’t really let Cynthia spend much time with him, anyway.

There was no reason to fight for Linda May’s approval when Cynthia already knew she wouldn’t get it. More than likely, it would only make things worse, would drive a further wedge between them.

For as long as Linda May had been married to her father, Cynthia had felt that it would have been better if she wasn't around them.

Linda May had made it painfully clear that she wanted a husband who didn't have the burden of a child, but it was too late.

Cynthia's father had never heard any of the rude remarks or seen the grimaces.

"I'm sorry," Cynthia apologized in a small voice. She didn't know what else to say.

Linda May was always angry at her, and the last thing she wanted was to make things harder for the woman who was going to look after her from then on.

"Yes, well, I suppose we are all very sorry. But it's too late to change things now, Cynthia. We just need to move forward, you know. We need to make do with what we can.

"Your father is gone, but we're all still here and there's no reason to get emotional about it," Linda May said. She was very stiff and Cynthia wished Linda May would be warmer, more like Miss Beattie.

Cynthia remained quiet, letting Linda May make the decisions moving on. When Nathan followed his mother out the door, Cynthia trailed behind them and they made their way to Miss Beattie's home next door.

Linda May was acting rather jumpy the entire time and Cynthia couldn't understand why she was being so odd. She wished Linda May would just be calm and patient, but she was always strange and even more anxious now than ever.

It must have been because she was so shaken by the death of Cynthia's father.

That made sense. It was the only reason why she would have had a

reason for acting this way, Cynthia imagined.

Everyone missed him and it was only normal his absence should leave everyone shaken and lost.

They reached Miss Beattie's home and Linda May knocked on the aged, wooden door. Miss Beattie opened it, appearing confused for a long moment until she took in the sight of Cynthia standing there, a sad expression on her face.

"Ah, I see," Miss Beattie said, her tone not exactly friendly. She looked up at Linda May and her eyes narrowed just slightly enough to pretend politeness.

Cynthia realized that it was for her sake. Miss Beattie had always been kind to her; it was Linda May she hadn't ever seemed to care for.

"I need to go into town with Nathan," Linda May said, somewhat nervously, an awkward smile spreading across her face with frantic eyes in contrast.

"I'm sure you do. And I take it you would like me to look after Cynthia?"

"If you wouldn't mind," Linda May answered.

Miss Beattie looked at Cynthia with compassion in her eyes and then back up to Linda May. It was barely a blink that flashed from that compassion to coldness.

"You know, the girl would probably love a chance to get into town. I'm sure being stuck with someone like me will be terribly boring for her," Miss Beattie said.

"No, no, not at all! You are a young woman and, therefore, much more exciting than I am. And you're a good role model for Cynthia.

"You know, she's a good girl and she will grow up to be an excellent

woman, but having someone like you around is only going to help matters,” Linda May said, clearly panicked.

“Maybe she needs someone in her life who will act like a mother,” Miss Beattie retorted.

“Well, as you know, I am making every effort to stand in that role, and I have for the past few years. But is it not also true that a child should have many people in her life to help her as she grows?

“I’d like to know that you’re here, able to assist me in looking after her as a friend and companion at times,” Linda May said.

“Don’t you really mean you want her to come spend as much time here as possible so you don’t have to deal with watching a child who isn’t yours?” Miss Beattie challenged her.

It hurt Cynthia to hear those words, even though she knew they were true. No matter how many times she heard something like that, it was still just as painful as the first time.

It wasn’t as if she wanted to be an inconvenience to Linda May. She hadn’t asked her father to pass away. But Miss Beattie was pointing out a very true thing, no matter how unfortunate it was.

Even if Cynthia had tried to ignore it for the past few years, it had always been true. Linda May had never taken her anywhere unless Cynthia’s father made her, asking her to do this for him.

Linda May had never wanted to, always offering an excuse as to why it wasn’t a good idea, why Cynthia shouldn’t be allowed to join her for whatever event it might be, even just going to buy flour from the general store.

“Regardless of what you want or don’t want, yes. I will look after Cynthia while you are out.

“But I expect you to think long and hard about what it means to look

after her now that Mr. Rollins has passed away,” Miss Beattie said.

Linda May grimaced and nodded, a contradiction in gestures to make Miss Beattie think she would do something she would never do.

Miss Beattie shook her head, clearly smart enough to know better. Cynthia looked at the floor, too embarrassed to acknowledge this charity.

“Well, thank you for looking after her for now. She’s had her breakfast, but may need lunch, depending on how long we are out for,” Linda May said.

“All right, that’s not a problem. I’ll get her fed. David is playing in the back and he’ll certainly want to play with Cynthia,” Miss Beattie said.

“Thank you, Joyce,” Linda May said at last, before turning away. Suddenly, she stopped and looked back at Cynthia.

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. At last, she gave an uncomfortable, somewhat apologetic smile before turning once more and walking away.

“That woman,” Miss Beattie muttered, shaking her head. Cynthia glanced up and saw the frustration in Miss Beattie’s eyes.

“I know she doesn’t like taking me places,” Cynthia said as they stood there, watching Linda May walk away, Nathan silently plodding along beside her.

“She doesn’t know what she wants. That’s the problem with Linda May. She’s as unpleasant as they come. Your father deserved better,” Miss Beattie said.

“You think so?” Cynthia asked.

“I do. And you deserve better, as well,” she added.

“I don’t know about that. My mother and father both died and Linda May can’t spend much time around me. I don’t know how I could deserve anything better,” Cynthia said.

“That’s nonsense. You’ll be alright, Cynthia. Besides, look at how she’s running off! You might get lucky,” Miss Beattie said.

“What do you mean?” Cynthia asked.

“Look at her,” Miss Beattie said. “Is that woman even planning to come back for you?”

T*en years later*

It had been a long day and Ray Crocker was exhausted from the get-go. He hadn't wanted to be this busy, but life just became that way without him even realizing it.

It seemed so sudden, as if he had woken up one morning and realized that if he didn't hurry up and make everything right, he wouldn't have anything at all.

Now that he and his mother were alone, he needed to ensure everything was perfect. It had to be right, as good as his father would have it—if not better.

The last thing Ray wanted to do was to make a mistake and disappoint the people who depended on him. Especially his mother. He couldn't fail her.

She needed him to be strong, to work hard, to make certain the ranch was thriving.

He also needed to ensure Thomas Halpert didn't run him out of business.

Ray's mother was always supportive of him, but he couldn't help worrying most of the time. He feared that something else could happen, that somehow, the ranch might run into trouble.

Ray quickly grabbed the hoe and worked the yard, making proper holes and taking his time to check that the weeds were gone before he began preparing the land for the garden.

Although his mother had already planted some of the earlier crops, it was going to start getting warmer in the next couple of weeks and she would need to get some other things in the ground.

He was prepping the space for some nice pole beans, looking forward to seeing them grow up the wooden trellis he still needed to build.

His mother loved frying up the green beans with a side of chicken or maybe some fish caught at the river on a nice, summer day. His father had been one of the best fishermen in town, just as he'd been one of the best ranchers.

Ray knew he would have to work hard to emulate his father, to make his mother feel as though he was still around. If he could get this land tilled well, making sure that the soil was nice and healthy for those pole beans, Ray was confident everything would turn out all right.

The sun was setting in the distance and Ray took a deep breath, pausing in his work for just a moment to close his eyes and breathe.

He was feeling just a little bit dizzy, but he sure wasn't going to give in to that. The last thing he needed was to start feeling faint. Tired men didn't do good work.

Unfortunately, he was still far from finished. With all the tasks that needed to be done, he couldn't stop now. His father wouldn't have stopped.

He would have continued on, working hard until every last chore had been completed.

"I'll do it right, Pa," he whispered, as if his father could hear him.

With that, Ray straightened his back and lifted the hoe again. Up and

down he went, crashing it into the soil and loosening the thick clods, tearing up whatever weeds were trying to clothe the earth.

Another wave of dizziness swept over him and he paused, closing and opening his eyes, leaning into the hoe for a moment.

“Ray!” called a voice from behind.

He turned and saw Mark running in his direction. It didn’t seem to be anything urgent, but Ray knew Mark was going to tell him to stop for the night and there wasn’t time for that.

“Hey there,” Ray said, greeting the ranch hand. He was secretly grateful for the distraction, knowing this would be a small break for him.

He didn’t want to admit it to Mark, but his exhaustion was getting the best of him. He just needed to be stronger and, eventually, he would be able to push beyond this.

“What are you still doing out here? It’s getting late,” Mark said. He had that disapproving tone he’d gotten so good at, knowing Ray’s mother preferred to have Mark be harsh with him about coming in.

Mark was his closest friend and, as such, it was easy enough for him to urge Ray into doing things. When it came from Ray’s mother, it was always said with the air of discipline, even when his mother was just trying to look out for him.

“I know, but I need to get this spot in the garden ready. You know my ma.

“She loves those pole beans and I have to make certain that she can grow a decent amount, enough to get us through the season and to can some for the winter months,” Ray said.

“You know you can do that tomorrow, Ray. Besides, it’s time for dinner. Your ma still has a couple of cans from last year’s season, so I

don't think you need to be focusing on this so much.

"She won't be planting for a couple more weeks. We've still got some cold nights," Mark reasoned.

"But I have so much other work to do. I mean, this is just the bean beds I'm working on. What about the tomatoes and peppers? I need to prepare them as well in the next few days.

"If I don't get a jump on this stuff, I'm going to fall behind," Ray said, picking up the hoe again and getting back to work.

"What are you doing?" Mark asked, taking a step forward as if to stop Ray.

"I'm getting back to work. Don't worry about me. You go on ahead and have dinner with my ma. I'm sure she'll be just as happy to serve you.

"She can leave me a plate in the kitchen and I'll eat later when I come in," Ray said.

"She sent me out here to round you up. She wants you in there for dinner and you know that. It's always the three of us in there together and that's how it ought to be.

"There's no reason for you to have to eat on your own," Mark argued.

Ray appreciated that everyone seemed to care—he just wished they didn't care to this extent. He wanted to be left alone, to have a chance to simply do his work uninterrupted.

It would have been much better if they had just let him get on with it instead of tempting him to come inside and have some rest. But how could he explain that? They wouldn't understand.

It seemed they always wanted him to take a rest, but they didn't know how important it was that he keep working. If he was going to keep

up the farm and ranch to the extent his father had, the last thing he could do was to stop.

If nothing else, he would be disappointed in himself. When he would try to go to sleep that night, he would toss and turn, full of regret that he had failed to achieve everything he'd wanted and he'd only made it clear that he didn't know how to run the ranch properly.

No, he couldn't give in, even as his muscles ached and even when the breeze sent a chill down his spine despite the sweat and heat he'd generated from working so hard.

"Please just tell her I'll be in soon, but it doesn't make sense for the two of you to wait on me. She'll understand. I'm sure of it," he said.

Mark shook his head and let out a harrumph of irritation. That was another of his many signs from Ray's mother. Ray narrowed his eyes at his friend, unwilling to give up or give in.

"None of that, Mark," he said.

"Just because you're the one who pays my wages now doesn't mean I'm not going to care about your well-being. Your father wouldn't have wanted this, Ray.

"I know he was a hard worker, but he didn't push himself to this extent. And if you're trying to prove that you can keep up with Thomas Halpert, I'd caution you against even thinking about it.

"That fella needs a good whooping, but if you get distracted by him, you're only going to start making mistakes," Mark warned.

Ray looked back at the earth in front of him. The light was departing the sky more quickly now and it would soon be nearly impossible to tell whether or not he was getting the weeds up.

Still, Ray knew he had no other choice. Whatever Mark said, whatever his mother wanted, he had a job to do.

“Are you even listening to me?” Mark asked.

“I am, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to come along with you. You ought to know by now that I need some time to work before I come in for dinner.

“As thankful as I am for you and Ma caring about me enough that you would come out here like this, surely you both know it doesn’t mean I’m about to come on back inside,” he said.

“Well, isn’t that some kind of gratitude?” Mark scoffed. “You aren’t your pa, and you don’t have to be. It’s time for your dinner.”

“I beg your pardon?” Ray asked, his tone carrying the challenge.

“You heard me. It’s best that you’re alive and healthy. That’s all that matters at the ranch. It’s what your ma wants, and it’s what I want, as well. No need to work yourself to death,” Mark said.

But stopping would be admitting failure. The past couple of weeks, Ray had gone in for dinner and then come out for another hour or two of work after, but he still wasn’t caught up with all the things he wanted done before the growing season.

Aside from preparing the garden, he needed to fix the roof of the barn again. This time, it couldn’t be a quick job like he’d done a couple months back.

In Montana, the weather was snowy and then rainy enough that he needed it stronger. Already, some of those replacement boards were sagging.

This time, he would have to do a proper job, replacing half of the entire roof.

And then there was the stable which needed cleaning up in a bad way. Those poor horses were living in a mess. Sure, Mark had said it wasn’t bad at all, but Ray didn’t want that for his horses.

He wanted pristine cleanliness. He wanted those stalls mucked out the next day.

Thomas's ranch was thriving. He had five men working for him, although Ray didn't know how he could pay that many men.

His ranch was just a touch smaller than Ray's and he didn't do quite as much business, although he was getting more and more all the time. Here, it was just Ray and Mark, with his mother handling the sowing and harvesting, the general cleaning, and all the cooking.

She worked hard, but it was Ray's goal to ensure that she didn't need to do too much. He hated to think of her having to slave away all the time. That simply wouldn't be right.

Indeed, Ray would be a failure if he quit now. He needed to keep going. With his dreams of having a wife and children one day, it was important for him to be a provider.

If he wanted to care for his family as well as his father had done for him and his mother, he needed to be able to work hard and achieve great things.

It wouldn't be enough to be a good man and a hard worker. He needed to be the best of men and the best of workers.

Nothing else would appease him.

"Your ma is going to be disappointed," Mark said.

"You're just saying that," Ray grunted, putting all his effort into the work of the tool. "You're trying to guilt me into coming inside, but it won't work.

"This is what I need to focus on right now. Don't go pretending otherwise."

"I'm not pretending anything. I'm warning you against working so

hard that you're going to hurt yourself," Mark refuted.

"Hurt myself?" Ray scoffed, standing up straight.

The movement was too much, too fast.

In his state of exhaustion, it only served to make him dizzier and Ray stumbled forward, using the hoe as leverage to hold himself up. Mark gasped in shock.

For a long moment, Ray was confused by a blur of motion, as though the world was spinning around him and Mark had become a kaleidoscope mixed into the strange image.

"All right, that's enough. This is just what I was talking about.

"You're too beat to be out here doing this work. Come on, let's get you back inside," Mark said, taking a hold of Ray and trying to steady him by putting Ray's arm around his shoulder.

But Ray took a step back, trying to free himself. He didn't want help. All he wanted was to be out here, proving that he could do this, that he was strong enough.

"I don't need help," Ray said slowly, the words feeling sluggish in his mouth.

"Can't you see how exhausted you are?" Mark asked, concern palpable in his expression.

"I'm perfectly fine. Now, where is that hoe?" he asked, looking around. At last, Ray spotted it on the ground, right in front of him. He leaned down, ready to grasp hold of the handle.

The last thing he saw was the earth rising up to meet him. Suddenly, everything went black.

“**Y**ou were such a little thing back then. Now look at you! A

young woman. You’re working so hard all the time,” Joyce said, smiling at Cynthia.

They had been telling stories about the season of life shortly after Cynthia had come to live with Joyce and David. Even though it had followed a terribly unhappy time, Cynthia knew how fortunate she was to be here with Joyce.

“I don’t work all the time, but I do work as much as I’m able,” she replied.

“You don’t have a choice. They always have you coming in at whatever hours they choose and that’s just not how life should be.

“It’s not like my work at the milliner, where I get to be there only for the hours we are in business,” Joyce said.

“No, maybe not, but factory work is long hours because there is a whole lot of demand for what we make,” Cynthia said.

“I suppose you’re right, but it doesn’t change the fact that I wish you would be able to come home sooner each day. And I heard the Watson factory just closed. Did you hear?” Joyce asked.

“I did. As it happens, a few factories have closed lately because of the growth in that Thompson company.

“I’m just hoping we can hold on for a little while longer and grow as much as they have,” Cynthia said, thinking about the place she worked and how important it was to her.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind if you worked elsewhere,” Joyce muttered.

“I’m lucky to have such a decent job. I won’t pretend that it’s easy, and sometimes the supervisors aren’t exactly gentlemanly, but we girls get along at the factory and we keep each other safe,” Cynthia said, grateful that she had her work.

In truth, she didn’t love it by any means, but she was grateful for the chance to bring in an income and help out with the family’s costs.

David was just fifteen and he was already doing work as a laborer, and Cynthia hated watching him go to work each day when he ought to have been in school. She hoped that, through her hard work, she could make enough to send him back to finish his education.

“I think it’s good you care so much about your work, but I want to talk to you about something else,” Joyce said.

Cynthia cocked her head to the side and waited. “What is it?”

“Well, I think you know how hard it is here. Our lives simply are not our own to live.

“It seems like each and every day, someone else is trying to push us along, to get us to do whatever they want,” Joyce said, lost to her disappointment.

“I know it’s not easy,” Cynthia said, simply acknowledging the truth.

“Exactly. And because of that, I wanted to tell you that I’ve found a new opportunity, something a bit different,” Joyce said, her tone settled.

Nevertheless, Cynthia saw the way Joyce flinched, as though anxious

to continue.

A few moments before, they'd been having a nice conversation, reminiscing about the past and skipping over the painful parts, like when Linda May took Nathan and left Cynthia with Joyce and never came back for her.

But something had shifted. Joyce was obviously trying to work up the courage to share something else, to say something she clearly didn't think Cynthia wanted to hear.

"Cynthia, I know we have a long history together and we have been in one another's lives for quite some time, but I don't want you to ever think it was out of obligation that I looked after you," Joyce said.

"I know that," Cynthia replied. "You never made me feel that way."

"I'm glad. The last thing I want is for you to think I didn't care about you or want you here. I truly did. I always have and I will always have a place for you," she said.

Cynthia waited, certain there was more to be said, that Joyce was going to tell her something that just might threaten their closeness. She didn't want to accept that it was possible, but she was quickly realizing Joyce was about to send her away.

"As you know, my sister got married last year," Joyce continued. "I read you her letter about meeting a nice man. He's very wealthy and he has some wonderful friends."

"That's excellent for her. May I ask why you're bringing this up?" Cynthia asked, knowing it wasn't easy for Joyce.

"I'm mentioning it because you ought to know that my sister said she has found me a husband. A good man, she says. And he's wealthy enough that David and I won't have to work anymore.

"We will be able to enjoy our life in a new way. David can go back to

school and finish his education. I can be a housewife, doing the cooking and cleaning.

“Well, he has a maid, but I can do other things,” Joyce said, her eyes not meeting Cynthia’s.

“W-well, that’s wonderful for you,” Cynthia said, knowing she couldn’t say anything different. She was happy for Joyce, but still couldn’t quite understand why Joyce was saying it like this.

“Cynthia, this man lives in Chicago. I know that’s far from here. Connecticut is a wonderful place to be and to live, but Chicago is a nice, big city, as well. And that’s where this man is.

“And I know that it would be hard for you to leave here, but... but I wondered if you might want to come along with us,” Joyce said.

Her hesitancy was the first thing Cynthia noticed. She couldn’t help it, but Cynthia sensed that Joyce’s sister had not approved this request. More than likely, Joyce hadn’t even asked her sister.

Cynthia knew her well enough by now to know Joyce would probably just take her along and let the consequences happen later.

Even if her sister and new husband were upset, Joyce would just say she didn’t know they would be surprised. She would say that Cynthia was a part of the family.

In truth, Cynthia did feel a part of the family, but not in the way Joyce may have expected. After all, Joyce was never a mother to Cynthia.

She had been a young woman, maybe in her mid to late twenties, when she had taken Cynthia in. David’s father had disappeared soon after Joyce became pregnant, so she’d had to do it all herself.

And now, she had the opportunity to marry a wonderful, wealthy man. That sounded like a dream. And it was a dream Cynthia would

support, no matter what.

“It would be hard for me to leave,” Cynthia said, knowing this was the right answer, that it was exactly what she was supposed to say.

Although this particular circumstance took her by surprise, Cynthia had known this was coming. She’d known that Joyce would eventually find a man to marry.

She was beautiful and, although she was in her mid-thirties by now, she still had a youthful glow to her. It was alluring for men all over who would see Joyce and not be able to hide their interest.

It was finally time for Joyce to move forward, making a life for herself and for David.

“I just want you to think about it,” she said. “Even though it would be difficult for you, I want you to know that you’re welcome to join us. I would hate the idea of...”

“Of leaving me behind?” Cynthia asked, saying the words that Joyce was too sensitive and kind to say.

“Exactly.”

“It’s all right, Joyce. You need to live your life. This is such a wonderful opportunity for you and I would never do anything to jeopardize that.

“I hope you know that I will be happy for you, no matter what. Even if it means you and David have to leave, and even if I have to stay behind, I will be happy for you,” Cynthia said, knowing in her heart that it was only right.

“You always were a selfless young woman,” Joyce said.

“Not necessarily, but I will never stand in your way. This is the best thing for you and I’m excited to know you might find happiness with

someone,” she said.

“Will you take some time to think about it before deciding? I don’t want you to make any rash choices that will end up leaving you here without any support,” she said.

“I know, and don’t you worry. I’ll be all right. I’m honestly not sure what I’ll do, but I am confident that I’ll find a place where I belong,” Cynthia said, hoping her words would prove to be accurate.

“Well, I did have a thought about something that might be an option for you,” Joyce said, pulling a piece of paper from her bodice.

She handed it to Cynthia, who looked it over and then darted her eyes up to Joyce’s face.

“A bride advert?”

“I know it might sound strange, but I thought it could be a nice opportunity for you. It would be a chance to meet a decent man, someone you choose.

“I know it would be a bit... that it could be difficult to go off and marry a man you’ve never met before. Nevertheless, I thought you would be interested in the thought of it.

“You should find a nice husband, and if you don’t want to come with me, you can still take advantage of a fresh start,” Joyce explained, still appearing rather anxious.

“I wouldn’t mind a fresh start,” Cynthia admitted, taking a deep breath and trying to imagine what that would look like.

Could she really put an advertisement in the paper like that? It was certainly a risk.

She might never find a husband anyway—or the worst case would be that she would find someone and agree to marry him, only to find out

that he was not the sort of husband she would actually want. By then, it would be too late, wouldn't it?

There was a lot to think about, a lot that would leave Cynthia in quite a strange frame of mind.

She understood that life needed to continue moving forward, but to make the right decision and know exactly how that needed to take place was more than she could think about at the moment.

But she was also tired of working at the factory.

Cynthia would continue working as long as she needed to in order to support herself and Joyce, but what would she have left in Connecticut if Joyce and David left?

That was really what it came down to. In her heart, Cynthia knew this was right.

Finding a husband and settling down was the best thing she could hope for. Young women craved this sort of an opportunity and she would be foolish not to take it.

"I can see that you're thinking, but I'm curious if you will give it a go or if the risk is too great," Joyce said.

Cynthia laughed and gave a shrug. She really didn't have any firm answers yet, but felt she might be able to figure it out soon enough.

"I need to think about it, certainly. It's a big decision.

"And what sort of man finds a wife through the newspaper? Do you think I could actually find someone worth spending the rest of my life with?" she asked.

"There's only one way to find out," Joyce replied with an encouraging smile.

“You’re right, but that doesn’t change the fact that this is a very strange thing for anyone to try.

“I mean, if you think about it, I might end up with some old man or someone who has very little respect and can’t find a wife in his own hometown. Would it be worth the risk?” Cynthia asked.

“I may be fortunate that my sister knows the man she and her husband want me to meet, but I’m still taking a risk in going. I don’t want to find myself there with someone I don’t love, someone who turns out to be very different from what I expect.

“And yet, I believe it’s worth it. And it just might be for you, as well,” Joyce said.

The last thing Cynthia wanted was to risk the chance of being abandoned again. More than anything, she couldn’t abide that.

And unless she had real confidence, she could not go to be with the man she may meet through the papers.

She would only go if she was absolutely certain they might have a future together, that she might truly be happy.

Was it possible for her to try? Could she really open up her heart to a perfect stranger?

Two weeks. How was Ray supposed to lay in bed for two whole weeks?

He couldn't believe that his mother and the doctor had discussed and agreed to this nonsense. Was this his punishment for not being stronger?

Instead of having another chance to prove his strength, to work harder and show what he could accomplish, he was stranded like this?

"You have been taxing yourself far too much lately," his mother scolded.

"I haven't," he refuted.

"Oh? Then why were you so exhausted that your body gave out? What do you think that does to a mother? You think I'm all right with seeing my boy collapse like that?" she asked.

Ray took a deep breath, feeling his heartbeat quicken. This was exactly what he'd been warned against. He wasn't supposed to let himself get worked up.

But how? How could he just lay there, as if he was some kind of log or lazy fella who couldn't keep up with his work?

The last thing he needed was for word to get around that he didn't have the stamina to make it as a rancher.

No matter how much Ray wanted to be a tough man with real strength and a head for success, he was coming to realize that he was still just a man like any other.

He needed sleep. He needed peace.

He needed to be able to fight for the sake of others—and if he was going to do it with any degree of dignity, he had no choice but to settle down and lay in that bed for the next two weeks.

Even if it drove him mad.

“That’s what I thought,” his mother said. “I knew you wouldn’t be able to admit that you’re exhausted, but it’s time you do.

“It’s time you allow yourself a chance to recover from the efforts you’ve been putting in since your father died. You know as well as I do that your exertion is only because you want to be like him, because you want to prove you’re as strong as he was.”

Ray’s eyes narrowed, but not at his mother. He was disappointed in himself and the fact that he wasn’t as strong as his father. He couldn’t believe his own weakness and how badly he had failed.

His father wouldn’t have ended up on bed rest like this. More than likely, he would have been able to keep hoeing—even eating his dinner as he did so.

There was a knock at the door and Mark entered, looking sheepish and compassionate when he took in the sight of Ray lying there. It was obvious to Ray that his mother and his closest friend were in agreement that this was the right decision.

Still, he wondered how he could fight it, how he could beg them to let him get out there and start working again.

It didn’t seem possible. His mother and Mark were adamant that he needed to obey the doctor and stay in that bed.

But when he looked closer at Mark, Ray suddenly realized there was more in his eyes than compassion and care. There was something else. Something... unnerving.

“What is it?” Ray asked, already on edge.

Mark looked to Ray’s mother in a panic, but it was obvious that she didn’t know the issue, either. Instead of answering, Mark simply shifted in his discomfort and shook his head.

“Hmm? No. Nothing. I’m just worried about you,” he said.

“There’s something else, isn’t there?” Ray challenged him.
“Something’s bothering you.”

“Whether there is or not, you don’t need to worry about it. I’m in charge for the next two weeks.

“I know I’m just a ranch hand, but I know this property well. I’ll take care of everything,” he replied, shrugging off Ray’s concern.

“Nah, something’s definitely going on. What happened, Mark? Are you going to tell me or not?”

At last, Mark sighed and looked down, pressing the bridge of his nose in clear distress. Ray suddenly wished he hadn’t pushed for an answer.

As soon as Mark told him what had happened, he wouldn’t be able to unhear it. Not only that, but more bad news in addition to the news that he was stuck in bed for two weeks would only put him in a worse mood.

Nevertheless, it was important for Ray to find out what Mark knew, what had him so upset. He only hoped it wasn’t related to the ranch or to Thomas Halpert.

“With what I’m about to tell you, I need you to remember the most important thing is that you get some rest,” Mark said.

“Understood. Now, tell me what it is,” Ray replied.

“As it happens, Thomas Halpert has just recently expanded his property,” he admitted.

For a long moment, all was silent, and the weight in the room was heavy. Even Ray’s mother didn’t respond with what rubbish it was and how they would get through it all just fine.

Normally a bright spirit and unwilling to give in to unfortunate chatter, she was certainly moved by this grave discouragement.

Ray didn’t know how to respond. It was rather fitting.

Here he was, unable to do even the smallest task, and Thomas was claiming his victory, taking over more land, growing and expanding his achievements.

More than likely, he would even be willing to come and visit Ray, throw it in his face so Ray realized Thomas was the victor and there was no chance Ray could ever come close to defeating him.

Then again, was it really about defeat? Oftentimes, he felt that it was.

His mother would hate that he thought of it that way, but Thomas was his greatest rival and it was important to Ray that he didn’t let the people of the town get the impression that he was going to fail, that he couldn’t live up to the hard work of his father.

Thomas would certainly play to that worry. Without a doubt, he would go around talking about Ray once the news of his confinement began to spread.

“It’s all right, Ray,” his mother finally said, taking a deep breath and resigning herself to what they had just been told.

“How is it all right?” he asked, angrily. “It’s not all right at all. You know what he said to me after Pa died? He said I would be a failure as

a rancher.

“He said I should just sell the property and get it over with, that there was no chance I would ever be any kind of a success in this life or any other.”

“And that’s awful, but it doesn’t mean he’s right,” Mike said.

Ray leaned his head back, rolling it over the pillow, and stared at the ceiling.

“This is not how life is supposed to be. I don’t understand how it got like this,” he said.

“That is exactly how I’ve felt every day since your father passed away, but there’s nothing we can do to change it, Ray. We simply have to move forward, to keep trying to push each and every day.

“I know it’s hard, but you aren’t a failure and you never will be. You know what Thomas is like. He’s always trying to stir things up.

“He’s jealous of your strength and has to try and knock you down,” she said.

“He has no reason to be jealous of me. I don’t think that’s it at all, Ma.

“The fact is, Thomas is just better. He’s a strong man with a bigger ranch and he isn’t so weak that he’s going to end up in bed for two whole weeks.

“Surely you know as well as I do that this is the last thing we need. And it’s only going to make me look worse in the town,” he said.

“It won’t, but I know you think it will. That’s why I want you to focus on something else entirely,” his mother said.

Ray looked at her in confusion. He didn’t know what she meant, but he felt fairly certain that he didn’t want to know.

“Such as?” Ray asked.

“You have nothing in your life but taking care of me and trying to get our ranch to thrive. That needs to change.

“You need to have someone else to look out for, someone who is going to fill you right back up in a way that no one else can. Someone who will be your companion,” she said.

“Oh, Ma. You can’t mean...”

“Yes, I do mean that,” she replied, handing him the paper. “And this is how you can find a good woman.”

“The paper?” he asked, an eyebrow raised in surprise.

“You may be shocked to learn that I know three distinct individuals who married as a result of these advertisements. Mr. Findlay? This is how he met his wife.

“And my cousin, Ada—you met her once as a child. She married a man she met this way just three years ago. There’s also Mr. Scott in town whose daughter married a man through these ads.

“To my knowledge, all three of them are quite happy,” she explained.

“But how can they be happy with someone they’ve never met before? I would never want to find a wife this way, Ma,” he said.

“Enough of that, Ray. Listen to me. You’ve told me in the past how badly you want a wife. You said having a family is deeply important to you.

“But here you are, fighting against a chance to have that. Enough. I’m telling you here and now that this is how you will find your future wife. This is the way to do it.

“If you don’t stop working long enough to meet someone, you will

never have this thing you claim to want so badly. I'm trying to give you a chance to finally meet a young woman who can be your wife," his mother said, exasperated.

Ray opened his mouth to argue, but he didn't know what to say. His mother was right. He was fighting against this, but what other choice did he have?

It was foolish to think that he might find someone when he wasn't able to stop working long enough to learn exactly who that might be.

Besides, this really was a chance. Even if he didn't want to spend these two weeks lying in bed, he could use this time to rest, to read the papers and write to someone who might interest him.

And he could think about the sort of husband he wanted to be.

"What do you think, Ray?" his mother asked.

He took a deep breath and nodded, shifting in his discomfort and accepting that this was something he genuinely needed to consider.

"I'll think about it," he said. "But it's better to meet someone in person."

His mother scoffed at that argument and gave him a playful glare.

"I would agree with you, but you have proven time and time again that you're not willing to make that effort. If you were going to try and meet someone in person, I would be happy to let you, but you haven't done so yet and I doubt you are going to in the future," she said.

Ray knew she was correct, but he didn't want to admit it. More than ever, he was wishing he'd spent time in the past allowing himself to search for happiness.

That way, he wouldn't be relegated to finding someone through an

advertisement in the paper.

“I just need a couple days to think about it,” he said.

“You can have a couple days, but in those days, I want you reading and taking a look to see if there’s anyone who might interest you,” she said.

“I will, Ma,” he promised.

“Good. I’m glad to hear it. Now, you get some rest. We’ll speak with you later,” she said, ushering Mark out of the room before he could say anything.

Ray watched them go and started to think about the suggestion his mother had made.

He was torn. He wanted a family and this might be a great way to start one, but what did it mean for his future? Would he find a decent woman?

That was only half the battle, he knew.

There were so many other questions floating around in his mind. Would he be a good provider? Would he make for a decent husband and father?

Could he really learn to be happy?

Cynthia let her body collapse into the chair in the small great room, feeling her weight sink into the rather flattened cushion that had struggled to maintain its shape over the years.

Joyce and David weren't home yet, but she expected them any time and, at that point, she would have to tell them her devastating news.

The last thing she wanted was to admit what she'd learned that day. Finding out that the factory was shutting down had been the worst possible news she could have received.

Without work, there really was no way she could stay in Connecticut on her own. One of her options was suddenly fading into impossibility.

Cynthia considered how difficult it would be to try and make ends meet, to keep up with the bills she would have to pay.

Of course, she would need to find new room and board, but she would have had to do that anyway. Without Joyce, the house would be gone and she'd need to move in with some of the other factory girls.

There were few options left to Cynthia and she was beginning to worry that this was a sign of things to come. What if she ended up without a place to live or people to be around?

All over again, she thought about the advertisement she'd placed in the paper. It had been such a risk, hoping someone would choose her.

But if no one did, if nobody cared about her enough to think of writing to her, she would come to find that her only option was to go with Joyce, after all.

Cynthia still wasn't comfortable with that idea. It was clear Joyce's sister hadn't invited her, that it was completely Joyce's decision to make the offer, which was enough for Cynthia to refuse it.

It had been around four years previous when her sister had come for a visit and Cynthia had overheard a conversation when she'd asked Joyce why she would be looking after a child who wasn't her own.

She'd criticized Joyce for taking Cynthia in, something Cynthia had tried to forget about and let go of.

The door opened and Cynthia sat upright, suddenly very aware of her posture of despair. She pasted a smile on her face and held it for Joyce as she came into the room.

"Ah, there you are," Joyce said.

"Yes, I'm here. Did David come with you?" she asked.

"No, not today. He's busy doing some work for Mr. Hobbs. I think he's going to be a while.

"You know what Mr. Hobbs is like about that fence of his. He wants David to put in new boards where vermin have gotten in and then he has to paint," she explained.

"Oh, I see. Yes, he probably will be gone for a while. But it's no matter.

"I'll be sure to keep his plate ready for whenever he comes home. I haven't started on dinner yet, but I will soon since we have most things ready," Cynthia said.

"Perfect. He'll be happy about that. Did you see the letter?" Joyce

asked, changing the subject quickly enough that Cynthia took a moment to register the question.

“Letter?” she asked.

Joyce was setting her things down, appearing distracted by a button that had become tangled by a thread. “The letter,” she said again.

“I don’t know what letter you’re talking about,” Cynthia said.

Joyce looked up at her and set the frustrating garment on a chair. “How long have you been home for?” she asked.

“I suppose it’s been nearly an hour,” Cynthia replied, looking at the clock. It hadn’t seemed like an hour. Had she really just been sitting there pondering for all this time?

“And you haven’t gone to your room?”

“No, I... I was thinking about some things that happened today,” Cynthia replied.

“It must have been something quite distracting that you wouldn’t have visited your room yet. Anyway, you ought to go and check. I left a letter on the bed for you.

“It looks like it could be a response to the ad you placed,” Joyce said.

“The ad? Really?” Cynthia asked, her eyes wide with shock.

It had been only a week since she’d sent the ad to the papers. How was it that someone had already written to her? Did that mean someone actually liked what they saw from her?

“You should hurry up and read it. I want to know what it says, who’s written to you. I want to know if he’s a decent man or not,” Joyce said.

Cynthia was up and on her feet in an instant, rushing to her room. She opened the door and there on the bed, as promised, was an unopened letter.

She picked it up and looked at the return address. Ray Crocker. It was a nice enough name.

From Montana? That was a shock. Cynthia hadn't thought about how far away she might be expected to go.

She had never been to Montana or met anyone from there, and it was strange to think of someone from that place writing to her like this.

Who was this man who would want a wife from Connecticut? Was it possible that he could really be the man she was meant to spend her life with?

After acknowledging the wonder of the letter, Cynthia finally opened it to read what Ray Crocker had to say to her. She did so with great wonder and care.

At last, she unfolded the paper and read the words before her.

Dear Cynthia,

I read the ad you placed in the paper and was intrigued by you. My name is Ray Crocker and I am a rancher living in Montana.

We have a good life here, but I know that another good woman would make it even better. I live on the ranch with my mother and we have a few small houses for ranch hands, but only one fella who lives on the property and is a good friend.

I don't know much about Connecticut, but I don't think it's much like Montana. Still, I would be interested to know if you might consider the possibility of getting to know each other a little bit and seeing if we might be a decent match.

I suppose I'm not sure what people usually write in these letters, but if you care to learn anything more about me, I would be happy to get back to you and tell you whatever you wish to know.

The only other things I have to say for myself are that I enjoy spending time with others and getting to know people well, but I also enjoy my work very much and I take great pride in accomplishing things.

It would be nice to learn a little bit more about you.

Thank you,

Ray Crocker

Cynthia smiled to herself, wondering what this man would be like and how they would get along. He seemed perfectly charming, but it was hard to tell from a letter.

Maybe she was only charmed because she'd never received a letter like this one before.

Maybe she was only happy about this because she'd scarcely spoken to a man who wasn't her employer or a friend of Joyce's.

Nevertheless, she was intrigued. She found the hint of insecurity to be endearing, the way Ray Crocker didn't seem entirely sure of himself. She wondered what he was like in person.

Cynthia rushed out of her room and found Joyce starting on dinner. Immediately, Joyce turned and gave her a look of anticipation.

"Well? Is it from the ad? What sort of man is he?" she asked with urgency.

"He's a rancher from Montana named Ray Crocker," Cynthia said in a rush, watching Joyce's expression light up.

"Oh, that's wonderful! How intriguing! I don't know anything about

ranches, but I imagine it would mean you would even have your own horse and you would have fresh eggs every morning,” Joyce said, as though these were two great miracles.

Cynthia laughed and handed the letter to Joyce, who started reading at once.

“He seems perfectly lovely,” she said after finishing it. “You need to write back to him right away. I’m sure he’s waiting patiently to hear from you, but you don’t want to keep him for too long.

“It’s better that you get your reply in the post tomorrow morning. It takes time for these letters to go back and forth and I’d hate for you to miss your chance with him.”

“As would I. Do you think he will like me? Do you think it’s too much to hope that we’ll get along?” Cynthia asked.

“You’re taking a chance, Cynthia. There’s nothing wrong with taking a chance. I really do believe that we’re both doing the right thing, even though we don’t know these men.

“And you still have time to decide, you know. You have so many choices.

“You can go to him, you can come with me, you can stay here...” Joyce said, listing off the options she believed Cynthia still had.

But Cynthia’s eyes were downcast and Joyce rested a hand on her shoulder.

“Cynthia? What is it? What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I don’t have another choice, Joyce,” she said. “I never wanted to say anything, but I heard your sister asking about me once. It’s not right for me to go there and be a burden on her.”

Joyce’s expression shifted to one of sadness and embarrassment, but

Cynthia didn't want to let it linger. She moved on quickly to explain the rest of her decision.

"And today I found out that the factory is shutting down. I won't have a job anymore.

"So, you see, this letter from Ray Crocker is the best thing that could have happened to me. It's the only option I have right now," she said.

"Oh... Cynthia," Joyce said in a sad, apologetic tone.

"Don't worry. It's a good choice. I'm just nervous, that's all," she said.

"I know, but you'll be all right. All of this will come together," Joyce said, as uplifting as she could be.

Without the option of staying or going to Chicago, Ray really was the only choice Cynthia had. Bearing that in mind, she quickly got herself together, returning to her room and sitting at the small desk so she could draft a reply.

Aware that Joyce would want to read the letter and ensure it had enough information, Cynthia knew what she wanted to say.

Dear Mr. Crocker,

I was very pleased to read your letter and I'm grateful for your interest in getting to know one another. I appreciated what you told me about yourself.

Life on a ranch sounds fascinating and I would love to learn more about it and what it's like.

As for me, I have never lived on a ranch, but I am a fast learner. I do appreciate getting to know new people and I have experienced having to move to new places and new situations in life.

At the moment, I live with a very dear friend, however, she is soon to leave

here and marry a man in Chicago. I had considered finding other young women to live with, but we just received word this morning that the factory we work in will be closing down.

Unfortunately, this means I will have nowhere to work for the time being. I am hopeful that there will be new opportunities on my horizon.

I am aware that it is difficult getting to know one another through letters like this, but I appreciate that you are willing to try and I do hope that we have a chance to continue writing.

Within the month, I will need to find a place to go, but I will keep you informed of any change in my address.

Thank you,

Cynthia Rollins

She bit her lip, wondering if she sounded too desperate in the letter. While she didn't want to force Ray Crocker into inviting her to come and live with him, she also wanted to be honest about her circumstance and the fact that she needed to move on quickly.

There was very little room for her to lose this. Without going to marry Ray, she had nothing.

Cynthia wondered if he would be interested enough to invite her to come to Montana.

But what if they met and he didn't like her? What if he had her come all that way and, in the end, he only decided that they wouldn't work out?

Was it possible she was opening another door to someone leaving her? Would she be abandoned all over again?

With only a few days left of resting in bed, Ray was desperate for something to do.

It still came as a shock when he received a letter back so quickly from Cynthia, the woman who'd posted an advertisement in the paper and seemed so interesting.

Ray wondered what more he might learn about her and, as he read her letter, the main thing he learned about her was how convenient it had been for their paths to cross in the paper as they had.

It was evident to him that Cynthia Rollins needed to find a new opportunity and he was starting to wonder if he could give her that. It would be a true privilege to have a woman in his life, someone he could spend his future with.

He thought about it for a while, his heart racing with excitement and the hope of a true partnership with a good woman. Whether or not that was what he would find, Ray had to try.

When he'd first seen her advertisement, Ray had been surprised by the simplicity of her statements.

There was an inherent humility he didn't see in the other women who had posted in the paper. Cynthia had described herself as a factory girl—a fact most women wouldn't be eager to share.

She'd also mentioned she was eager to see what else might be

available to her in life, a sentiment he could understand.

Although he knew his future was here, at the ranch, there was a part of him that had always wondered if there might be more out there, if there was something else he could do with his life.

His mother would be pleased by this. Once she found out that he'd decided to send a letter, she had been overjoyed, but hadn't pushed him.

Now that he was actually engaged in correspondence and Cynthia appeared to be interested in getting to know him further, Ray realized this was the best opportunity he would ever come across.

There seemed to be something about this woman that drew him in. He didn't know yet what it was, but he was certainly ready to find out.

He was also hoping he could improve her situation. She clearly needed to find a place to belong and to get away from the circumstances burdening her at the moment.

He hoped he could provide her with a place to be comfortable and happy, a place where they would even be happy together.

At last, Ray read through the letter once more and then decided it was time to write his own in reply. He quickly slid out of bed and crossed to the desk in the corner.

He pulled out paper, a pen, and ink before climbing back into bed and setting the ink on the bed stand. He knew his mother would be frustrated if he sat at the desk to write the letter, and she would be bringing in his dinner soon enough that he would risk being caught.

Ray dipped the pen in ink and began to write.

Dear Cynthia,

Thank you for your reply to my letter. It was very nice to hear from you

and to learn a bit more about you.

Although I understand your circumstances are difficult, I'm wondering if there is something I might be able to do to aid you in moving forward. Although it surely cannot be easy having to make the choice you are making, I want to give you another option.

As your position at work is soon to be no more, and your friend is leaving to be married, I would like to ask you how you would feel about coming here and seeing if we might be a good match.

This may sound like a wild idea. After all, we don't really know anything about one another and I understand that it seems like a bit of madness to think of us getting married, but you said you have only a month and, so far, you seem like a nice woman.

It would be grand if we could spend time together in order to know how we fit and to see what sort of a future we could have.

I would love to show you all about life on the ranch and let you give it a try. It's a good life.

If you do not think this is too wild an idea, please write to me and I will make arrangements for you to come soon. It would be my pleasure to have you here in Montana to be my wife.

I hope to hear from you soon,

Ray

In disbelief that he had actually just written to propose marriage to a woman he'd never met before, Ray couldn't help grinning to himself. This was it.

This was the future he had chosen, and he was convinced that it was right. Unfortunately, he felt his letter was worded so awkwardly that he was afraid she would reject him at once upon reading it.

How could he convey the question more smoothly? Was there a way? He didn't think there was another option and, in truth, this was just the man he was.

If Cynthia Rollins couldn't handle his discomfort in a proposal, she probably wouldn't like getting to know him much in person, anyway.

Ray hoped Cynthia was a good woman. From the tone in her letter, he trusted she was, but how did he know, really? There was no way to be sure.

Even if he thought she seemed decent, was it possible that he would come to find she was nothing at all like he'd expected? And what if all of this was actually a mistake?

He looked at his own letter again. He didn't have to send it. This was his own choice; it was up to him to decide if he wanted to take this step or not.

If he chose not to invite Cynthia to come be with him, his mother might be upset. He would need to spend more time getting to know the women in town and see what they were like.

But if he did go through with this, he would have a woman coming here soon. He would have a chance for a future and for the family he so desperately wanted to have.

This was his opportunity for something truly great.

Still, he worried not only for how she would be as a wife, but also how he would be as a husband. What if he failed Cynthia?

He certainly wanted to be a good husband, the kind that a woman like her deserved, but he found himself deeply insecure, thinking there was a possibility that he might come to find that he was every bit as weak as Thomas accused him of being.

If he didn't know how to take care of his family, Ray would prove he

didn't deserve to have a family at all. And if he humiliated himself, surely he would humiliate them as well.

His mother would end up terribly ashamed and it would be all his fault. No one would let him get away with that.

He would forever wish he'd made a different choice, that he hadn't taken this step to begin with.

"Ray?"

His mother's voice came from the other side of the door.

"Yes, Ma? Come in," he said.

She opened the door and entered, a tray in her hand with a meal on it that smelled absolutely delicious.

"Is that your spiced cabbage?" Ray asked.

"Of course it is. You know I wouldn't miss out on bringing my boy his favorite meal. I have the chicken cooked with my dried lemon salt and the cabbage you love so much with the pepper mix," she said. She was always so proud of her spices.

"Good thing you grew so many peppers last year. I would be terribly sad to miss out on this," Ray said with a grin.

His mother laughed, as she always did when he gave her a compliment. She had never been very good at accepting when he told her how well she did things.

His father had often teased her about it, but Ray found it admirable. He hoped he would be able to interact with his future wife in a playful way as his parents had, and that his wife would be a humble woman, whatever other qualities she may have.

"Now, you should get to eating. You need to keep up your strength,"

she said.

“I know, Ma. I’m working on it,” he replied.

“It’s only a few more days until the doctor comes to see you and decide if you’re free of the bed or if you need to stay here and rest a little longer,” she warned.

“Oh, please, don’t even suggest that possibility. I can’t stay here any longer. I need to get moving again. It would be terrible if I had to stay in bed a while longer. I feel very well rested,” he insisted.

“I’m not the only one you have to convince, Ray. While I’m very happy you seem to be doing better, I don’t want you back out there until we’re sure,” she said.

“Well, I’m doing my best to rest. But I will say that it’s not easy when I have exciting things afoot,” Ray said.

He couldn’t stop smiling, and that was when his mother seemed to notice for the first time.

“Exciting?” his mother asked. “What’s so exciting?”

“It’s this,” he said with a smile, handing his mother the letter.

“I’ve decided to ask Cynthia to come and to be my wife. As it turns out, she needs to have an option available to her very soon, and I wish to be that option.”

His mother stared at the letter, wide-eyed, before looking up at Ray. A smile slowly spread across her face and Ray could see that she hardly believed him at first, but once she did, she was thrilled.

“Do you think it’s the right decision?” he asked.

“I think it’s perfect, Ray. I’m so glad you liked her letter enough to do this. I know it must be scary, since you really don’t know anything

about her, but there is one secret I have learned when it comes to marriage,” she said.

“And what’s that?” Ray asked.

His mother sighed and looked off, wistfully. He could see something of the young woman in her, a romantic bride. She had the dreamy appearance of love.

“I learned you cannot choose whether or not you fall in love. When you first meet someone and you simply can’t help but adore them, there isn’t anything that can stop you.

“But once you’ve been in love for a while, once you get to know each other, love shifts. It turns into something closer resembling commitment.

“You don’t choose to fall in love, but you do choose to stay in love. I think, in a situation like yours, you can choose love,” she said.

“Even if I don’t fall in love?” Ray asked.

“Even then. While I hope that you do, there is no shame in choosing to commit to someone for the rest of your life, to treat them with honor and respect, even if it’s lacking the romance,” she said.

“Did you love Pa that way?” he asked.

“I did. But there were days when my love for him was a choice, not a romance. And that’s all right. Even on those hard days, choose to love your spouse.

“And if you and Cynthia never find the romance, choose to love her anyway,” his mother urged.

Ray nodded, although he understood that none of this would make sense until Cynthia was there and they’d finally met. He didn’t know if he would have romantic feelings for her or not, but he hoped they

could at least have a friendship and the sort of partnership his mother was suggesting.

That would at least be something, even if it wasn't everything.

"Thank you, Ma. I hope I can be a good husband for her," he said.

"I know you will be. You're a good man, Ray. She will see that from the start and there's no need to worry," his mother said.

"Well, there is one thing I need to worry about, even before we find out whether or not I'll be a good husband," he said.

"Oh? What's that? I don't think you need to worry about anything at all," she replied.

"I'm sending her this letter, but there's still a chance that she won't want to marry me. I don't know how she'll reply," he said. "Is it really possible she will come all this way to marry a stranger?"

When Cynthia read the letter again, it still didn't seem real.

How could this be possible?

How could it be that Ray not only wanted to continue getting to know her, but he actually wanted Cynthia to come and marry him, to be his wife? It was a wonderful, remarkable turn of events.

At last, she had something that she had been hoping for. This was an opportunity she hadn't believed would come, but here it was at last.

"Life on a ranch..." she said to herself, sighing dreamily as she imagined the early morning hours of waking to milk the cow and gather eggs, bringing them inside and cooking for Ray as he got ready for a long day ahead.

She pictured what it would be like for him to come in for lunch and tell her about the cattle that had tried to run, but that he had chased after and rallied back, victoriously.

Of course, this imaginary version of Ray might turn out completely different from the man who had written to her.

What if he ended up being very old? Or not handsome at all? Or what if he was rude and spoke with his mouth full or preferred for her to be a maid rather than a wife?

She had so many concerns, and all Cynthia wanted was to know, once and for all, that things would be just fine. She wanted certainty that

she and Ray would be happy together.

And that was something no one could give her.

When Joyce came into the great room, adjusting her skirt and looking somewhat frantic, Cynthia stopped her.

“What’s the matter with you? I never see you in a state like this,” she said.

“Oh, I know, it’s absolutely foolish,” Joyce replied with a laugh. “Would you believe that I’m nervous?”

I need to go and have my photograph taken so I can send it to this man I’m supposed to marry. He very sweetly asked for it in his last letter, saying it was so he would know me when my train arrives.”

“Maybe he was telling the truth,” Cynthia said.

“No, he just wants to see me and know what sort of woman he’s getting. I hope he doesn’t expect anything different, not someone younger or more beautiful,” Joyce said.

Cynthia took in the sight of the woman who had raised her as though she were an older sister or an aunt.

Joyce had always been beautiful, Cynthia thought, but it was true that her age was beginning to show in the little creases at the corner of her eyes and the way her jawline sagged ever so slightly.

Nevertheless, Cynthia didn’t think this man had any reason to criticize Joyce.

“He will think you are perfectly lovely. I have no doubt about that,” she said.

“You’ve always been kind, Cynthia. I don’t know that it’s true I’m lovely anymore, but David’s father thought I was back when I was

young. I did love him a great deal, you know,” she said.

“I know you did. And he loved you. This man will, as well,” Cynthia said.

“Enough about me. What about you? You received another letter, didn’t you?”

“I did. He asked me to come and marry him,” she said, the words sounding strange when spoken aloud.

But Joyce gasped in delight. “He did? That’s wonderful news! I am so happy for you, Cynthia! You are going to be the most beautiful bride.

“I can hardly believe that the both of us are off to marry men we’ve never even met before, but I’m sure we’ll both be very happy, won’t we?” Joyce asked, ending such a positive statement with her evident worry.

“We will,” Cynthia said, trying to convince herself.

“And you’re going to live on a ranch, aren’t you? What will that be like? Has he told you anything about your duties and what you’ll be expected to do, aside from being a wife?” Joyce asked.

Cynthia shook her head.

“He didn’t say anything about it. But I imagine I’ll have to learn to milk a cow and I’ll probably just be doing the cooking and cleaning otherwise.

“His mother lives there; he mentioned it in his first letter. I don’t know if that means we will share the duties?” Cynthia said, curious as to what it was going to look like.

“Well, that is certainly wonderful. I’m sure the two of you will be very happy. He’ll show you everything when you arrive.

“You know, you should also be prepared for things like learning how to ride a horse. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

“You can go out for rides with him across their land, maybe even having picnics in the fields,” Joyce said, musing as romantically as Cynthia had been.

A part of Cynthia worried that her expectations were wrong, but what else could it be? And if Joyce also thought this was how things would go, maybe it wasn’t so far-fetched after all.

Perhaps she really would have that wonderful marriage and she would have a chance to indulge in the excitement of a life out on the plains.

“I do hope I can prove my worth to him. I keep trying to imagine what he’ll be like, but I can only think that he’s probably a good man.

“I mean, if his mother is there, she is obviously willing to spend time around him and that’s a good thing, right?” Cynthia asked, hopeful it was a sign that he was a good man.

“Well...” Joyce began. “As a mother, I can tell you that we often overlook the behaviors of our sons.”

She laughed, but Cynthia could see that she was partly telling the truth.

“What I mean to say is that yes, he’s probably a good man if his mother can bear to live with him, but that doesn’t mean you want to depend on that.

“Sometimes we can push beyond the ways our children behave because we love them so much we are willing to endure a lot of difficulty,” she explained.

Cynthia pursed her lips, acknowledging that reality. Joyce was right and she needed to consider it. The fact was, maybe living with his mother wasn’t a sign that Ray was a wonderful man any more than

Joyce living with Cynthia meant she was a wonderful woman.

Then again, Cynthia was impressed by nearly anyone who was willing to care for someone without abandoning them and, perhaps, that was enough. All she'd ever known was having people leave her behind, letting go of her.

After the death of her mother, her father had remarried only to die a few years later. And then her stepmother had abandoned her within weeks.

Joyce had allowed her to stay here, but now Joyce was moving on, taking David with her. Was it possible that Cynthia was simply impossible to stay with?

She was frightened by that thought and knew it would likely haunt her for the rest of her life. She would always be worried, waiting for the next person to leave her behind.

And what if she woke up one day and found that she really didn't have the people she thought she had? What if even after years with Ray, he left her?

Taking a deep breath and realizing that her hands were shaking, Cynthia tried to steady herself. It was important that she not show these worries or it might only give him more of a reason to question her.

All she wanted was to prove herself, to prove that she was a good woman and a hard worker and was capable of doing all the things he would want her to do on the farm.

"What if I'm a disappointment?" she finally asked Joyce.

"A disappointment? How could you be? You're a sweet, lovely young woman. You are beautiful and he won't be able to deny that by any means.

"I don't know why you would even ask such a silly question," Joyce said.

"Because it's possible that he will find me lacking. I mean, he could marry anyone, but he chose my ad from all the others.

"I don't want to leave him regretting that decision or thinking he would have been happier with another woman. What if I get there and he decides I'm not what he's looking for and he'd be better off starting fresh?" she asked.

"You mean, you worry he won't even get to the wedding part and he'll decide to move on without you? I wouldn't worry about that, Cynthia.

"It's very unlikely that this man or any other would treat you that way or that he would be so cruel as to try and pass you off without giving you the care you truly deserve," Joyce said.

Cynthia looked down, not wanting to say what was on her mind in that moment. Joyce, however, took a step closer and Cynthia realized she didn't have to say anything at all. Joyce understood.

"Linda May was a selfish woman, Cynthia. And don't for a moment think that I'm leaving here for the same reasons she did. I love you, you know.

"You're like a sister and a niece and a daughter all rolled into one for me. I'm going because I have to, but that doesn't mean I'm abandoning you," she said.

"I know that. I would never accuse you of that," Cynthia said.

"I'm glad, but I also want you to remember that you may have had a lot of people leave you, but only one of them did so with an ugly heart. She was just an unpleasant woman all around.

"I never liked her. So you don't need to worry that Ray Crocker is going to have that kind of an attitude. If he does, it's better if you

politely tell him that you just don't think he's the right man for you," Joyce said.

Cynthia shifted at that last statement from her sadness to a gentle laugh.

"Oh, yes, I'm sure he would appreciate *that*," she said with sarcasm.

"I know, you're right. But regardless, I want you to remember that even if you go all the way there, you still don't have to suffer.

"You can come to Chicago with the spare money you've got or you can even find a place there to settle by working in town. I'm sure you'll do just fine," Joyce said.

Cynthia nodded, hoping she was right. She allowed herself to think about that wonderful image she had in her head of an idyllic field and horses, the cattle grazing in the distance.

It was a nice image, one she hoped would come to pass. But in the back of her mind, Cynthia was worried, and she knew she would stay that way.

There were still so many questions and concerns, so many chances that things might not go right and they would have to learn the hard way that they didn't belong together.

What if Ray ended up deciding she wasn't worth his time? Would he try to send her back to Connecticut?

She hoped she would still have enough of the money she'd saved and was taking with her that she could go to Chicago and find Joyce. There was a risk with that, however, and she didn't know if it was one to take.

But she would have nothing to go back to in Connecticut. And the worst part was realizing the truth of her life thus far. After all, if Ray didn't want her, she couldn't blame him.

It wouldn't be the first time someone had tried to get rid of her.

Cynthia's heart was full to bursting with excitement. She couldn't believe she was here, on the train, making her way to Montana.

It was wild to know that she had come this far already, with Joyce and David alongside her.

At some point, the train would come to a stop in Chicago. And when that happened, it would mean saying goodbye to the woman who had helped to raise her for all these years and the boy who had been like a brother to her.

It was impossible to let go of how much they meant to her, but Cynthia hoped she would make them proud and that they would all stay in touch.

When the time came at last, Cynthia took a deep breath, knowing this was her goodbye. It was the moment she would have to let go of the life she'd lived in the past and move on to a journey she couldn't yet imagine.

"I don't want to leave you like this," Joyce said, embracing Cynthia with tears in her eyes.

"I know, but you must. This is an exciting day. There's so much ahead and it really is wonderful. I think you know that and the last thing you should do is feel bad.

“You’re not leaving me behind. You’re simply moving on to something new,” Cynthia said, hoping to encourage Joyce.

“You really are remarkable, Cynthia. You shouldn’t have to be so strong, but you are. I only wish I’d had the chance to express how well I think of you and how happy I am to have known you.

“I feel as though I wasted time, not making sure you knew that I love you as if you were my own sister or niece,” she said.

“Joyce, I know you care about me. You have always been the best person in my life and I hope you know that I am forever thankful to you for that.

“You and David have been my family and that will never change, not even with this transition,” she said.

Joyce sighed and nodded, pulling away. Her eyes were still misted with tears, but Cynthia smiled.

“Promise you will write to me often. And tell me as soon as you arrive. I want to come home to a letter that says you’re safe and happy with your new husband.

“Promise me, Cynthia. Promise me that you will do whatever it takes to have a good life,” Joyce said, practically begging.

“I promise. And you must do the same. I want to know all about the man you marry. I’m sure he will be absolutely grand.

“It’s a shame we don’t have time for me to go out with you and meet him,” Cynthia said.

She looked out onto the busy station platform. There was a mass of people and she knew he probably hadn’t even made it inside. If he had, he would struggle to find Joyce.

There wasn’t much time before the train would be departing again

and Cynthia couldn't risk leaving to meet him and then missing when the train left again.

It was difficult, but she had to accept it. Joyce was going on to her new life and Cynthia would be setting out further west for hers, as well.

Although a part of her wanted to let go and say goodbye peacefully, the tears that sprang into her eyes left her clinging for Joyce once more.

"I won't forget everything you've done for me," she said.

"I know," Joyce sobbed in reply.

Cynthia reached for David, who was old enough by now that he wasn't fond of showing his emotions.

Nevertheless, when Joyce let go, David pulled Cynthia close and she heard his sniffles and knew that he was sad to be losing her, sad that she was leaving them just as they were leaving her.

"You will have a good life," he whispered, as a promise and a prayer.

"So will you, David. I'm sure of it," Cynthia replied.

He let go and Cynthia took a deep breath, wiping her eyes. It was time to get back on the train and make her way to Montana.

No matter how hard it was to leave, she understood that this was the right thing to do. She had made the right decision.

"Well, I will write you both soon. We will see one another again," she said, feeling the urge to make the promise one last time.

With that, Cynthia turned from them just as the train whistled its warning that it was time to leave. She climbed back in and ignored the ache in her chest as she made her way back to her seat.

Once Cynthia was seated again, she glanced out the window, expecting to search the crowd for Joyce and David walking away. Instead, they stood there, smiling at her and waving their goodbye.

When the train started to move, her heart began to race. She was about to start a whole new adventure, and it was something she couldn't have possibly fathomed until this moment.

While the rhythm of the train drummed along, she watched out the window.

Although Cynthia had brought a book to read, she found she was far more interested in what was taking place outside in the wide, beautiful world.

As they departed Chicago and its stunning lake, Cynthia watched the city melt away and the homes become fewer and farther in between.

The landscape grew wider and more rural, with vast expanses of nothingness between the cities. It was remarkable to see how the land shifted, flattening until they reached a series of small hills and then flattening again.

She had never traveled like this before, had never seen so much of the country.

Having lived in Connecticut her entire life, Cynthia would never have imagined that she would have an adventure like this one, but it was remarkable to travel along and see everything that surrounded her and passed her by.

The train stopped in another town, one much smaller than Chicago, and loaded and unloaded a few more passengers. The contrast between this train station and the ones in Chicago and Stamford and the other cities could not have been more dramatic.

While the larger areas were bustling with people dressed in nice clothing suitable for work and business, the people from these rural

communities wore simpler clothing.

Although city women donned their fine, black hats to go with crisp white tops and black skirts, the country ladies wore plain, floral print dresses.

She also noticed a saloon girl, who wore a crimson dress cut so low it made Cynthia blush and she looked away, wondering what life must be like for people out here.

No more than ten people boarded the train before it moved on again, heading past meadows and up through rocky hills and back down again into gently sloping valleys.

It was astonishingly beautiful when they passed by fields of corn and wheat.

Then, there were the wildflowers, setting striking colors against the lushly green grass. An open, clear sky sat above the horizon with nary a cloud in sight.

Cynthia wanted to be out there. She wanted to enjoy this beauty and was hopeful that Montana would be something like this, as well.

The woman sitting next to her on the train was deeply invested in the book she was reading, but Cynthia found that if she wasn't enthralled by the beauty outside, she was anxious in her heart about the future she had chosen for herself.

She needed to be distracted or she felt she would go mad.

"Where are you headed?" she asked sweetly.

"Me?" the older woman asked, smiling. "I'm just on my way home. Montana."

"Oh, how lovely!" Cynthia exclaimed. "That's where I'm going as well. Is it as beautiful as everything I see out here?"

“Even more. You will be amazed,” the woman said.

Cynthia was glad to hear that, hopeful she would at least have something to comfort her in this new place. If she didn't know anything else about Montana, at least she knew it would be beautiful and that was a relief in itself.

“Are you going to see family?” the woman asked.

“No,” Cynthia said, freezing and unsure what to say next.

But the woman gave her an understanding smile.

“I see. You're one of those young women coming out to marry our ranchers, aren't you? Well, that's fine and well. I'm sure you will find a good man.

“If we have anything, it's hardworking fellas who want to take good care of the women in their lives,” the woman said.

“Really?” Cynthia sighed in relief.

“Really. You must be anxious about meeting a man you're supposed to marry, but there are many young ladies doing this these days and it's not a bad choice.

“I just hope you know what you're getting yourself into if he's a farmer,” the woman said with a laugh.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I mean that it's not an easy life, being a rancher's wife. I don't know, maybe you're marrying a carpenter or a preacher or a banker, but I'm married to a farmer.

“I wasn't born into a farming family, but I had lived around it enough that I understood what was expected of me. City girls don't always know that,” the woman warned.

Cynthia tried to smile and convince herself that she would do just fine.

The last thing she wanted was to admit to this woman that, indeed, she didn't know anything about farm or ranch life and she would have no idea how to handle the sudden change.

She was deeply anxious now that they'd had this discussion. Cynthia was prepared to make adjustments in life and she knew she would have to learn some new and different things, but she hadn't been worried until this woman gave her such a specific warning.

She wondered if she'd been fooling herself to think she could settle into this new life easily.

Although Cynthia had trusted that things would be fine with Ray even though they didn't know one another aside from a few letters, she was starting to think it had been a mistake to rush the engagement.

What if she didn't do well at the ranch? What if Ray didn't like her? What if she didn't like him?

All at once, the weight of these questions felt heavier. She had thought about them in the past, but always believed she would manage to get through it just fine and make things right.

She'd thought that, no matter what, she would adapt to the strange circumstances she had gotten herself into.

But if this woman was right and she might be hindered by her lack of knowledge in regards to the life she had chosen, it was possible Cynthia wouldn't be happy at all—or Ray wouldn't be satisfied with the wife he had chosen.

"Don't you worry," the woman said, apparently seeing Cynthia's panic. "You don't need to be upset or afraid.

"I didn't mean to scare you, only to give you the warning that a lot of

hard work comes with this life, and you'll need to be ready for whatever you come up against. I'm sure you'll find it's not so bad, after all."

"I suppose I hadn't thought about the dramatic shift it would be for me," Cynthia said. "Well, I *have* thought about that, but I may have tried to overlook it for the sake of my own peace of mind."

"And there's nothing wrong with that. You will be all right. If he's as good as most of our men are, he'll let you settle in for a few days and then show you some of your responsibilities.

"I'm sure he will spend a lot of time with you and teach you about life around the farm," she said.

"Yes, I'm sure he will. He would have to know that I don't know how to do any of this," Cynthia said, telling herself that it would be all right since Ray wouldn't expect anything different.

"Exactly. He'll be reasonable. Just focus on the good things ahead and the fact that you are doing what you wanted to do," the woman said.

With that, she returned to her book and Cynthia's mind raced with worry. She wished she hadn't spoken to the woman after all.

It was clear this lady didn't think she had given Cynthia a reason to worry, but maybe Cynthia had been burying those worries all along.

Maybe, despite herself, she had been pushing them down and couldn't push them any further.

At the base of it all was her main, frightening question.

What if she and Ray weren't a good match?

Ray shifted from one foot to the other, anxious and wondering how much longer he would have to wait until Cynthia arrived. The train was surely coming soon, wasn't it?

He couldn't believe this was the day. It was astonishing to know that he was finally about to meet Cynthia and that he would marry her.

He was clinging as best he could to the idea that he would manage to provide well for her. He trusted that it was possible as long as he worked hard and made every effort to be successful.

If Cynthia was able to see how much of an effort he made to give her a good life, he was sure she would be content to live there.

Of course, there were plenty of other risks at hand. There was a chance they wouldn't fall in love right away, although he imagined it was more likely than not since they didn't know one another yet.

But he hoped a day would come soon when he and Cynthia would have a chance to give it a go and really make an effort to get to know one another.

In the meantime, he imagined things would be a bit awkward between them.

For nearly two weeks, Ray had been back at his chores. The doctor had insisted he take Sundays to rest and that he work no more than ten hours a day the rest of the week, but Ray had found a way around

some of those rules.

When his mother was cooking dinner, he would stay outside until she called him in. It had worked for the first few days until she started making dinner a little bit earlier, which he knew was intentional.

It seemed to Ray as though everyone was fighting against his own efforts to make the ranch better. He knew they didn't see it that way.

It was clear they simply wanted him to rest, but he didn't know how to rest when he needed to get so many things done before Cynthia arrived.

Having only two weeks to prepare for her meant there were still tasks unfinished.

He wanted the land to be as his father would have had it, in the best condition possible for introducing his new wife to the property. It was only right that he ensured everything was at its best for the sake of the future and his new family.

He would need to spend a lot of time with Cynthia now that she was coming. It would be difficult, especially since Thomas was expanding his ranch and Ray had to try and keep up with that.

He couldn't risk failure.

He spotted the train in the distance, chugging along and making its way toward him. This was it. As the metal beast sounded its approach, Ray's stomach turned on itself.

He couldn't believe she was really about to arrive.

At last, the train came to a stop in front of him and he sucked in a breath, his shoulders tensing, and waited.

The doors opened and an elderly man came off the train followed by the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. This was not what he had

expected.

He wondered if he was wrong for having hope that this was Cynthia, but when her eyes found him and he saw her look at the single rose in his hand—as he had told her he would have when she arrived—he saw a gentle smile of relief on her face.

Indeed, this was Cynthia. She was not the moderately attractive woman he had hoped to find, or the appearance that he had, deep down, anticipated in a wife who was willing to cross the country to find a husband.

Somehow, he'd managed to come upon this woman. This shockingly beautiful woman, who had long, medium brown hair and round, blue eyes.

She was tall with a nice figure, and Ray saw another man take a quick glance at her as he came off the train.

“Excuse me?” she asked, hesitantly.

“H-hello,” he replied, holding out a hand to shake hers while clinging to the rose in his other.

“Are you Ray?” she asked, taking his hand.

“I am. And you must be Cynthia,” he said.

“It's very nice to meet you,” she said.

“And you. You're... you're not what I expected,” he admitted, laughing in spite of himself.

At once, her face drained of color and she looked upset.

“No!” he said quickly. “I mean that in a positive light. You're... well, I'm really glad you're here. It's difficult to know what to expect, that's all.

“I suppose I was worried that I might be disappointed, but I am actually really glad you’re here.”

The words were far from elegant, but it was all Ray could bring himself to say, not knowing how she might respond to anything more. Cynthia began to blush and she looked quite relieved by his assessment of her.

He didn’t want their first conversation to be his confession that he found her astonishingly beautiful, but Ray thought it wasn’t a bad thing to let her know that he had noticed her.

“Well, anyway, we should go on ahead and get to the church. My ma waited out with the buckboard so we could meet one another first,” he said, leading Cynthia along and taking her bag from her.

“Thank you,” she said, still somewhat sheepish with that sweet smile of hers.

“It’s not a problem in the least. If there’s anything else you need, please don’t hesitate to let me know. We want to be sure that you’re comfortable here, you know.

“It’s probably frightening, coming to a new place like this, but you’re very brave for doing it anyway,” he said.

“I’m sure I’ll like it here. It certainly is beautiful,” she replied.

Ray felt pride swell in his chest, knowing that she approved of where he lived. He led her through the train station to where his mother was sitting on the buckboard.

At once, she stood and rushed to greet Cynthia.

“Oh, how lovely it is to meet you!” she exclaimed in excitement.

“And you. I truly am looking forward to knowing you better,” Cynthia said.

They were just climbing into the buckboard when Thomas came riding by on his horse, his jaw dropping when he laid eyes on Cynthia.

Ray smugly grinned and looked at Thomas with daggers in his eyes. His rival came to a slow halt as though ready to say something, but Ray decided he might as well show off his new bride-to-be.

It was a nice chance to introduce Cynthia and let Thomas know he wasn't quite the big shot he thought himself to be. If he realized that Ray had found a woman as beautiful as Cynthia, he was sure to understand that he couldn't win every battle he tried to fight with Ray.

"Thomas, how nice to see you," Ray said, taking a bold step forward. "I would like to introduce you to Cynthia. We're just on our way to the church."

Thomas looked at Ray with wide-eyed surprise. It was clear he was impressed but didn't want to admit it. Cynthia's beauty shone brightly and he knew Thomas couldn't ignore that.

But, true to form, the man immediately started putting on a show of his own.

"Cynthia, is it? Good heavens, you are lovely. I am surprised, I must admit.

"After all, I would imagine that a woman as astonishingly lovely as yourself would hold out for an equally astonishing husband," he said.

Cynthia blinked back in surprise and looked at Ray as if she wanted rescuing. He wasn't about to let Thomas make this lovely woman uncomfortable, so Ray stepped forward.

"It is entirely up to Cynthia what she wants. If you are in search of a wife, I'm sure someone can point you in the right direction, but you won't find one right here and now," he said, firmly.

Thomas sneered and shook his head. "Maybe that's what you think, but I'm sure the fine lady can speak for herself. Can't you, darlin'?" he asked.

Cynthia blushed and looked away, clearly uncomfortable.

"Ray," his mother said in a warning tone.

"It's all right, Ma," Ray said, keeping his eyes trained on Thomas, who was glaring back at him. "Thomas knows better than to get into this and so do I. We'll just head on out."

"That's a fine idea. You get on back to your little ranch. And Miss Cynthia," Thomas said, turning back to her, "if you change your mind about marrying Ray, I'm right next door.

"It's the largest ranch in town and you can't miss it. You'll be welcome any time you like."

Thomas gave Ray an arrogant nod and tipped his hat before taking the reins and moving on. It was clear to Ray that Thomas hadn't been intimidated or jealous like he'd hoped.

Instead, Thomas was simply trying to express that he thought he was every bit as worthy of Cynthia's attention as Ray was and gave her reason to question Ray's success.

"Ray, I warned you against trying to show yourself up against that man," his mother said.

Cynthia looked between them, clearly searching for an answer.

"You were right, Ma. Cynthia, I'm sorry you had to be subject to that. Thomas is a bit of a hothead and I don't always know quite what to say to him to get him to leave us alone.

"But I hope you don't take him too seriously. He really enjoys hearing his own voice," Ray said, bitterly.

“It’s all right. He clearly wishes he could be more like you,” Cynthia pointed out.

Ray laughed and shook his head, amused by that idea.

“Well, it’s very kind of you to say that, but Thomas doesn’t care for me one bit and his motivation in life is making sure I know that. He works hard and has managed to do pretty well for himself.

“My hope is that, one day, my own hard work will pay off to show I can run the ranch as well as my father did,” he said, hoping he had struck a noble spin on things instead of allowing his rather petty frustrations with Thomas be at the center of the dilemma.

“I’m sure your father would be very happy to hear that,” Cynthia said. It was clear she was still uncomfortable, but had made a firm effort to show she cared about Ray and was going to be by his side instead of turning to Thomas.

“I have to agree. He would have been perfectly proud of Ray. He always was when he was alive and there’s no reason to doubt that he would be now,” his mother said.

“Well, thanks, but I have a lot of work to do if I’m going to stand in Pa’s shoes. Anyway, we ought to move on. The minister will be waiting for us,” Ray said, growing awkward.

In truth, he was deeply regretting the fact that he had allowed his pride to get the best of him. He shouldn’t have introduced Cynthia to Thomas.

Now, instead of being jealous, Thomas was looking for another option to tear Ray down. That was the worst thing he could possibly experience.

Had he made things even worse with Thomas? And more importantly, had he made himself look bad in front of Cynthia?

What was she thinking about him now? Did she view him as petulant for that little argument?

Ray was embarrassed and wished he could go back and undo it. He had made a terrible mistake in trying to show off like that.

If he'd just been a little bit less petty, he might have ensured a good first impression with Cynthia.

Not only that, but if he'd given Thomas the chance to show his awful behavior first, it wouldn't have been Ray who had seemed prideful, but Thomas.

Regardless, it was done now and there was nothing he could do to take it back. Cynthia had seen him act that way and she would come to her own conclusions.

But Ray hoped the next couple of hours would prove to be a good deal better than that. He was about to marry this beautiful woman he didn't know.

Sure, it was a risk, but it was one he was willing to take—even more so now that he had seen how lovely she was. He only hoped the woman inside matched the woman he was seeing outside.

"Are you ready?" Ray asked, taking the reins in his hand once they were all loaded onto the buckboard.

"I'm ready," Cynthia replied, the wonder and curiosity in her eyes shining brightly.

Ray smiled, pushing aside his worries. He was about to join his life to this woman and there was nothing anyone could do to ruin that—not even Thomas Halpert.

They made their way along the road and he clung to the hope that the future would be bright. He would simply have to work hard to ensure nothing else stood in their way.

They walked into the small church and Cynthia's heart was racing. She could hardly believe the moment had come.

Here she was, a woman who had traveled across the country in order to marry a man she didn't know. And yet, she had made it—and now, she was going to make a promise to be with him forever.

Marriage was such a massive commitment, but it was not one she was afraid to make.

As far as Cynthia could tell, it was her only choice and she was quickly coming to realize that it was a choice she wanted.

She liked Ray so far. They hadn't spoken about anything all that important yet and, with his mother around, they hadn't had much time to share anything deep.

Still, she appreciated that he seemed loyal to his ranch and that it was clear he wanted to show her off a little bit. That other, awful man had made her uncomfortable, but she tried to forget about it in favor of excitement for the event ahead.

Ray looked very handsome in his suit, although she could tell he wasn't all that comfortable in it. His dark brown hair and striking green eyes made for a nice contrast.

He was taller than her, which was a relief since she was a fairly tall woman. And he was nicely broad and seemed rather muscular.

She held the rose he had brought for her and walked with him to the front of the church. His mother followed behind and then sat in the front row when the minister came to greet them.

“Good afternoon,” he said.

“Good afternoon,” they echoed in unison.

Cynthia glanced at Ray, shyly, and he returned with a similar expression before they both looked back at the minister and waited for him to give them their instructions.

“Let us begin,” the minister said.

He went through a short message about the importance of marriage before moving on to the vows, asking if they would commit to love one another through all things, for better or for worse.

“I do,” Ray said.

“I do,” Cynthia added.

The minister went on and, by the end, he smiled at the two of them and at Ray’s mother before adding the final remark. “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” he said.

Cynthia exhaled, realizing she had been holding her breath the entire duration of the wedding.

Ray took her hand and as they departed from the church as a married couple, she found herself wondering what the future would look like.

She still hadn’t seen their home and didn’t know how she and Ray’s mother would distinguish their expected duties. Would Cynthia do the cooking or the cleaning?

Would she be helping with other things? What had the woman on the train meant about how she would need to adapt to life on the ranch?

After a quiet trip from the church, with only light glances between Cynthia and Ray, they arrived at the sprawling lands that made up the ranch. A nice, large house sat in front and there were a couple of other small homes for the ranch hands spread around the property.

A man came out to greet them and Cynthia wondered who this could possibly be.

“This is Mark. He’s our ranch hand and he’s also an excellent friend. I’m sure you’ll like him,” Ray said.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” she said, greeting him.

“And you. You’re a whole lot prettier than I expected. I never imagined Ray would find a woman who’s beautiful,” he said, laughing at Ray’s expense.

It was very different from the conversation that had taken place with the fella in town. This was mere teasing, Cynthia sensed.

It wasn’t the same competitive behavior she had seen with Ray and the other man.

“Anyway, we should all go in and have a celebration,” Ray’s mother Anita said, looking rather excited as she ushered them all inside the home.

Cynthia wanted to stay outside where it was so quiet and peaceful. She wanted to see more of this incredible land that the house was on.

She knew, however, that this was a celebration for her and the new marriage and it was a chance to get to know her new family better.

She was hopeful that it would be a good opportunity to learn more about Ray, especially.

Inside the house, she was shocked to see how marvelous it was. Although she’d appreciated the small home Joyce had in Connecticut,

it was nothing like this.

That home had had two bedrooms, one of which Cynthia had shared with Joyce, and a kitchen and sitting room. But this?

The hallway was endless and she couldn't imagine how many rooms were in the home. She saw where a door opened to the vast kitchen and another which was a great room larger than any she'd entered before.

She wondered about the room she would share with Ray, feeling anxious about staying there with a man. Nevertheless, Ray was her husband and she trusted he would take good care of her.

Anita led them all to the sitting room and she brought out lunch, which she had clearly prepared before they left to get Cynthia from the train station.

It was a lovely, elaborate meal. Cynthia was incredibly grateful for such a treat.

It was strange, having them do so much for her like this. In many ways, Cynthia felt as though it was the first time since the death of her father that someone had been truly excited about her, that they cared for her out of a choice.

Although Joyce and David had loved her as family, it had never been their own decision to do so. This, however, felt like Cynthia was being welcomed into something new and remarkable.

She couldn't believe she was so fortunate.

While they ate lunch, Anita and Mark kept the conversation alive by asking Cynthia all about herself, such as the sort of work she had done in Connecticut and about her family.

"Well, I was mostly raised by a family friend after my parents passed away," she said, leaving it vague.

She had no desire to share that she had been orphaned and then abandoned. It was too difficult to talk about even on her happiest days and this was certainly not the time to mention it.

“Such a shame,” Anita said, shaking her head in dismay.

“Yes, it was. But I am glad to be here now and thankful for the chance to know your family better,” she said, trying to keep the conversation light.

After the meal, they took Cynthia around the ranch, showing her the property and where things were at.

“It’s truly stunning,” she said, looking out over the fields and wondering what she might get to do each day and how she would enjoy it.

She could see the cattle that dotted the grass and the stable where she imagined the horses were kept. The property seemed endless and all she wanted to do was explore.

“Well, you and Ma can decide about the cooking and cleaning, but other than that, you’ll have plenty of chances to wander around and see things.

“You’ll help out with the garden and milking the cows, plus we’ll get you confident with the horses. I’m not sure if you have much experience with them, but I’m sure you’ll do just fine,” Ray said.

“I would love to learn,” she said, already feeling overwhelmed but not wanting to show it.

“Aside from that, we’ll show you how to—”

“Ray,” his mother said, in that soft, warning tone that Cynthia had already heard her use with him.

He stopped and looked at his mother with a question in his eyes. It

was clear he didn't know what he had said wrong, but Anita appeared slightly anxious, trying to give him a message through her wide eyes.

"I think we should give Cynthia plenty of time to settle in and rest, don't you?" she asked.

Ray looked down and nodded, clearly embarrassed. He seemed nervous all of a sudden and Cynthia didn't know why.

"Yes, of course," he said. "I'm sorry if I'm overwhelming you."

"It's quite all right," she said, knowing it was the appropriate reply.

"You'll have to forgive Ray. He's a hard worker and sometimes he forgets that he needs to give others a chance to get used to things. Don't worry, Cynthia.

"You'll do just fine and you can take your time learning how to do things around here. We have plenty of time and space to show you what tasks there are and we can work on things together," Anita said.

"Thank you. I'm looking forward to learning all the things I need to know about the ranch," Cynthia said.

In truth, she sensed she was probably going to be overwhelmed at times. It was clear Ray was a hard worker, just like his mother had said, and Cynthia imagined she would be kept rather busy on the ranch.

Although she was glad for that, she also worried she might end up struggling to cope and learn how to do things at times.

The last thing she wanted to do was fail or show weakness and she feared that, if she didn't keep up like Ray was talking about, she would only prove herself unworthy of living there at the ranch.

He had high expectations and the warnings from the woman on the train were coming back to her. Was it possible that she had just

committed to a life she couldn't handle?

Would she ever be able to prove herself worthy of living here? And what if she came to really like it here but still failed and was inevitably sent away?

"Do you want to meet some of the animals?" Ray offered.

"I would love that," Cynthia replied.

She followed him, along with Anita and Mark, to the stables. The horses were inside their stalls, each one standing and looking around in a way that she imagined must be terribly boring for them.

"We give them a lot of time to run and be free, but we also need them ready in here for whenever we have to go into town. Have you ridden before?" Ray asked.

"No, I haven't, but I would love to learn. I may not be the most exciting woman in the world, but I can learn how to be adventurous," she said, feeling self-conscious about her lack of skill.

"That's not a problem. You'll be all right, I'm sure. I think it's just going to take some time and I'll help you learn," he said.

"Ray is an excellent rider and he's a good teacher," Anita said.

"He really is. I've been riding since I was a boy and he's even given me some pointers," Mark added.

"Well, I look forward to learning. I'm sure it's going to be an adventure," she said.

"Anyway, we'll see how it all comes around. If you want, you can go and meet them," Ray said.

Cynthia looked awkwardly at the horses. They were beautiful from a distance, but what did he want her to do?

How was she supposed to meet them? Did he want her to pet their noses? But they had such large teeth! She didn't want to risk one of them being angry and biting her.

In Ray's and his mother's complete comfort with the beasts, they seemed to think she was just being coy. Little did they know that she truly wasn't sure how to respond.

But Cynthia walked along the stable and looked at the horses and smiled, keeping enough of a distance that she didn't need to worry about anything. At last, it seemed like the others were ready to move along.

"How do you feel about taking a look at the hens?" Ray asked.

"Oh, certainly," she said, relieved that at least hens wouldn't be as scary as a large horse.

But once they reached the henhouse, she was desperate to run off instead of standing there while the birds pecked around her feet.

It was obvious this was going to be a very different life from anything Cynthia had lived before.

Would she manage to make Ray happy? Her biggest fear was that he would see her discomfort and decide Cynthia just wasn't right for him.

The last thing she wanted was for Ray to think she was a woman to abandon.

Ray woke up in the morning and squinted to see whether there was light bleeding through the curtains.

Nothing yet.

He sighed in relief. He had worried the evening before that he might not be up early enough. Something had kept him up late. They were celebrating something.

In his groggy state of mind, it took a moment for him to remember what it was, but when he glanced next to him and saw Cynthia lying there asleep and breathing steadily with her hair in a long braid crossing the front of her shoulder, he remembered.

He had gotten married the day before, and this was his wife.

For a long moment, Ray was shocked, but it quickly shifted to a smile and he quietly slid out of the bed and threw on his trousers. He needed to get outside and start working before it got light.

More than likely, his mother would be annoyed if he didn't come in for breakfast and that meant finishing things beforehand. There was so much that needed to be done and he made every effort not to wake her.

As silently as he could, Ray made his way out of the room and down the hall, finally reaching the front door and going outside. He breathed in the cool, morning air and set to work.

Within an hour, he had mended a fence and, as the sky began to glow with a shockingly pink light, he took some time to dig up weeds in the garden. The sun certainly provided better light than the half moon had and he was able to clear some things out.

Ray was on his way to get some straw so he could mulch the newly weeded garden beds when he saw Mark coming his way.

“Ray?” Mark called.

“Morning. You’re up early,” Ray said.

“I could say the same thing to you. What are you doing out here? Did you just get up and come out for eggs?” Mark asked.

“No, I’m just taking care of a few things since I didn’t get any work done on the ranch yesterday. I figured if I came out early enough, I could get some chores completed that I didn’t get a chance to since we had the wedding and then the celebration and everything,” he said.

“Ray, I don’t think you understand that you were supposed to take yesterday off for the wedding, and now you’re meant to take a few more days off so you can get to know your wife,” Mark said.

“Oh, that’s all right. We’re going to get to know each other just fine. In fact, if she knows I’m a hard worker, I think she’ll know just about all there is,” he said nonchalantly, laughing at his assessment.

“Don’t be a fool,” Mark said, clearly unamused. “This woman crossed half the country to come and be your wife.

“It would be disrespectful of you not to spend some time with her and let her ease into all of this. You are a newlywed and you need to get home to spend time with your new wife.”

“We will spend plenty of time together. I don’t understand why you’re insisting on this,” Ray said in confusion.

He couldn't see why Mark was so passionately urging him to go inside. Cynthia wasn't even awake yet and there was no reason for Mark's urgency.

"I'm insisting because you just married a woman yesterday and you snuck out early in the morning so you could get some work done. That's not the kind of thing I would expect from you," Mark said.

"Why not? I'm a rancher, Mark. This is what I do every morning. You know I'm always out here early," he said.

"But not on a day like this one," his friend said.

"You seem to think I have to go back in and be a dutiful husband even though my wife was still asleep when I came out. What you're forgetting about is the fact that she married a rancher.

"She knows that. What's she going to expect?" Ray asked.

"She's going to expect a city husband," Mark argued.

Ray scoffed. "In that case, she shouldn't have married a rancher," he replied, shaking his head in bewilderment. He couldn't understand what Mark was getting at.

"I know she married you, Ray, but she's from the city. She knows nothing of country life.

"If you don't explain to her that you need to come out here and do work in the mornings—which, by the way, ignores a few specific instructions the doctor has given you—she won't have any idea why you've left her alone in there.

"She only knows what men are like in the city, and you have to be diligent to show her otherwise," Mark said.

At that, it made sense. Of course, she wouldn't know what it was like to live in the country. She was a city girl and wouldn't know what

farmers and ranchers were like.

Sure, she had known she married a man from out here, but he had taken for granted that she would understand what that meant.

“I see ...” Ray said, looking away.

“Good, because this is important. You need to ease her into this life instead of throwing it at her. I know you’re a good man, Ray, but she doesn’t know that yet.

“You have to be sensitive to what she might need from you and all the things that you take for granted about living here,” Mark said, his wisdom unfortunately needed in that moment.

Ray chewed the inside of his cheek and nodded.

“All right, I’ll head back inside. I don’t want her to think I’m not interested in getting to know her, it’s just that I want everything here to be perfect for her,” he said.

“I know that, and I’m sure she does, as well, without you having to be gone all the time. Have a nice breakfast with your wife. It’s worth taking the time with her,” Mark said.

Ray followed him into the house and they made their way to the kitchen, where his mother and Cynthia were already finishing breakfast. It was only then that he realized he must have been up and working for nearly two hours.

Of course, Cynthia had been up for a while; he ought to have considered that sooner.

“Mark, why don’t we have a nice breakfast on the porch?” Ray’s mother offered, nodding to Mark as she grabbed two plates full of food.

They were gone before Ray and Cynthia even had a chance to greet

one another.

“I suppose that was meant to give us a chance to spend some time together?” Cynthia asked with a laugh.

“Yes, I think so,” Ray replied.

He was nervous but understood the importance of this opportunity and why his mother and Mark had insisted upon it. He did, however, also notice that Cynthia appeared somewhat anxious, as well, looking at him with trepidation.

He couldn't imagine how frightening it must be for a young woman to cross the country as she had. She seemed to be afraid of upsetting him.

He read it all in her eyes and wondered what was behind it.

“It smells delicious,” he finally said, looking at the plates she had filled.

“Oh, yes. Of course. Here, you must be starved. I'm not sure how early you left, but you were gone before I woke so you must have gotten a lot of work done already,” she said.

“I did, yes. There is much to do and I'm just glad that all those projects are now completed.

“Anyway, you must be exhausted after your journey yesterday. I didn't want to wake you,” he said, sitting at the table as she came to sit across from him.

Cynthia put a plate in front of Ray and he was eager to dig in, only now realizing just how hungry he was.

“Thank you for that. I really was very tired and I needed the rest. I appreciate that you were so considerate,” she said.

“It’s nothing. You deserved it. I mean, you arrived in town, then we got married, and then we all celebrated. It was a lot, I’m sure. But I hope you’re settling in all right,” he said.

“I think I am. It’s very nice here and everyone is taking such good care of me. Your mother has been remarkable. You are so fortunate to have her in your life,” Cynthia said.

“Thank you, I really am,” he said, taking his first bite of the meal, his eyes widening in surprise.

“Is everything all right?” she asked, afraid.

“It’s excellent,” he said. “I didn’t know if maybe you all cooked a little differently in the city, but this is wonderful. Thank you.”

“I’m so glad to hear that,” she exhaled in relief. It was clear Cynthia was tense and worried, frightened she might disappoint Ray.

The last thing he wanted was for his new wife to be afraid of him.

He wished she would relax and feel completely at peace. If she only knew how glad he was to have her here and to have her in his life, he was sure she would be able to calm down a bit.

“You know, there really is no need to be anxious,” he said.

She smiled sweetly, clearly a little embarrassed that he had pointed it out. “Is it that obvious?”

“I don’t blame you for it. I can’t imagine what it must be like to do this. You’re very brave.”

“Thank you. A part of me didn’t know what it would be like and I’m just relieved that it has come this easily. But another part of me still wonders why you decided to do this.

“Why would you order a wife to come like this? I can’t imagine you

actually having to. After all, you're a successful man with a wonderful ranch and a good mother.

"You have so much that it seems strange you wouldn't just find a wife from here," she said.

Ray laughed and gave a shrug. "I work hard," he said. "Ma wanted me to marry and I've wanted to marry for an awful long time.

"She knew, however, that I don't always take the time to go into town and meet young ladies like most men do. It didn't seem like the right thing for me," he said.

"So you decided to just bring someone along?" she asked.

"I suppose that's it," he replied, taking another bite.

For a moment, their eyes met and they simply smiled at one another. When Cynthia opened her mouth to speak, Ray found he was eager to hear what she had to say.

"I'm very happy that I got to be the fortunate woman you chose. I don't know why you picked me, but I'm glad you did," she said.

Ray set down his fork and dared to reach across the table and take Cynthia's hand in his own.

"I'm glad I did, too," he said, giving her hand a squeeze.

Cynthia blushed and he could see that she was trying to hide her excitement.

He started to wonder if this was what he had been missing all along. Was Cynthia the one who would bring his life back into balance? Would she help him make things right?

As Ray took his last bite, he heard a sudden commotion outside and stood quickly.

His mother was calling for him and he rushed out, leaving Cynthia in his wake, to find Mark racing after a loose bull. They needed to get the beast back in its pasture—and quickly.

“What happened?” he called, racing for the stable so he could ride after the bull and try to lasso it. Mark came running behind him to help.

“I don’t know, I just saw him near the chicken coop all of a sudden. We need to get him back in his pasture before he runs into everything,” Mark said, angrily.

As Ray joined him in their efforts to get the bull back where he belonged, a pang of regret spread throughout Ray’s body.

He had enjoyed the breakfast with Cynthia, but it had been a mistake to linger so long. If he had been more diligent about taking care of the fence, he could have avoided some of this.

It wasn’t right that now, he and Mark were having to handle this.

Ray promised himself he wouldn’t let this happen again. Sure, he would try to spend time with Cynthia, but this was the last time he would let his duties go undone.

He couldn’t bear to lose anything and the most important thing to him had to be the ranch.

If he let his guard down for even a moment, everything his family had worked for would be at risk.

Cynthia was terribly busy, learning all of the things she was expected to do on the ranch.

The chores were many and she didn't know how she could keep them all in her head, so she quickly began writing down a list.

Unfortunately, the list included so many details and steps for each task that it was starting to look like a jumbled mess.

She didn't know how she could possibly read it back to herself without getting terribly confused.

Following Ray around the ranch, she tried to focus on the things he was telling her, but there was just so much. She liked him and found him interesting and appreciated his marvelous work ethic, but Cynthia was also concerned that she wouldn't be able to keep up.

He was such a hard worker that she knew it would be difficult to manage as many tasks as he seemed to expect.

"And here is the chicken coop. So, like I said, you and Ma will milk the cows together and share that responsibility and you'll alternate the cooking and cleaning—or however the two of you want to divide those responsibilities.

"But Ma's back can't handle all the bending over that's required in the henhouse. Honestly, I think she should step back from the milking as well, but she says it brings her peace, so she won't do that," he

explained.

“That’s all right. Since I’ll be helping out with the milking, I’ll make sure she’s not doing it all and I’ll take on the task of gathering the eggs,” Cynthia said, quickly writing it down on her third piece of paper.

“That’s excellent. You’ll want to use this basket for gathering the eggs because it has a nice wide, flat bed so you don’t have as many risks of breaking the eggs.

“You’ll want to make certain you don’t crush them by layering them on top of each other, but it’s rare that we get so many eggs on a day that it could happen,” he explained, showing her the basket.

“Perfect, thank you,” she said, trying to keep up and hide her bewilderment.

“Oh, and you’ll need to get to know the garden pretty well. Some of the weeds are good edibles.

“It’s getting a bit late in the season, but you’ll want to keep an eye out for henbit since Ma makes an excellent stew with it and you should also make sure you save the dandelion roots and the burdock roots. But get rid of most of the weeds or they’ll take over the garden.

“And be sure that when you uproot the last of the carrots for the season, you don’t accidentally get any hemlock,” he said with a laugh, as though it was a joke Cynthia ought to understand.

She tried to give a laugh, but it came out awkward and strange.

She was certain he could hear her hesitancy and discomfort, but instead, Ray just moved along and told her about the next set of chores.

It seemed as though she would need to stay as busy as Ray did or he would be disappointed in her. If she failed him, she didn’t know what

might happen.

Instead of taking that risk, Cynthia decided she simply wouldn't stop moving.

Once Ray left her to her own devices, she started cleaning up inside the house. Anita had gone into town to take care of a few things and, by the time she returned, Cynthia had lunch ready for everyone and was feeling confident.

After all, she knew how to cook and clean. Those were things she had done before.

But after lunch, Anita was busily tending to the clothes that needed to be mended for Ray and Mark. Cynthia wasn't sure what to do next on her list since so much had been taken care of while Ray showed her around that morning, so she decided to try and handle the weeds in the garden.

Unfortunately, she came upon a section of the garden that appeared overwhelmed by little weeds, just springing to life. She went through and pulled them, one by one.

The leaves were still small, but some had long roots already.

"Goodness gracious," Cynthia whispered to herself, surprised by the rather dramatic number of them and their unexpected strength in the soil.

Just as she pulled up the last of the little weeds, she heard her name shouted in a panicked voice. "Cynthia! No!"

She turned and saw Anita running toward her with a look of horror on her face.

"What is it? What happened?" Cynthia asked, standing.

"D-did you just pull all of those out?" Anita asked.

“Of course. Ray said to pull up all the weeds. I wanted to get the garden beds in good condition for you,” she explained.

Anita pressed a hand to her forehead and looked as if she might cry. Instead, she took a deep breath and tried to relax her shoulders.

“What did I do wrong?” Cynthia asked in a small voice, terribly frightened that she had ruined something.

“I should have been the one to show you. Ray didn’t explain as he should have,” she said.

“Explain what?”

“These rows weren’t weeds, Cynthia. They were seedlings.

“I only have a small amount of space to start any seeds inside the house, so most of them have to be planted directly outside when the weather is warm enough.

“It only became warm enough a couple of weeks ago,” she said.

“So... I pulled up all the vegetables?” Cynthia asked, her heart starting to pound from her discouragement.

“It’s all right,” Anita said, calmly. “I just wish Ray had explained it. But this does mean we have an awful lot to do.

“If we don’t get the seeds in the ground immediately, they won’t have long enough to grow before the winter months.

“I’m just grateful you didn’t pull up the bush beans. Those are going to be our only hope for the next few months.”

Cynthia was terribly discouraged. She wished she had asked for help since she didn’t know anything about gardening.

Instead of making this awful mistake, she could have done the right

thing and only lost a bit of her pride rather than having it massacred like this.

Anita brought out all of her seeds, which she kept in little paper packets, the names of each vegetable scrawled across the front in a delicate handwriting.

“Now, these here are zucchini and they grow fairly quickly. If we can keep the bugs away, they’ll do us nicely.

“It’s the tomatoes I’m eager to have, but they take longer and we’ve now been set back by about two weeks. I don’t think we’ll have time for this one or this, but these tomato seedlings should be all right to replant,” Anita said.

Cynthia had no idea why some tomatoes would be a better option than others, but she nodded and did everything as instructed, planting the seeds where Anita said and at the correct depth.

With each type of seed, Anita gave her a different method, which Cynthia dutifully followed.

In the time it took her to complete one row of sowing, Anita had finished the other two. It was clear that Cynthia had a whole lot to learn and she only hoped she wouldn’t make any more mistakes like this in the future.

The last thing she wanted was to ruin her frail reputation with the family.

It was a struggle not to cry, but Cynthia couldn’t let herself appear weak in front of Anita. This was her mother-in-law and she worried Anita would look down on her even more if Cynthia got emotional over her mistake.

It was all so embarrassing already that the last thing she wanted was to make things worse.

Rather than crying, Cynthia continually stopped and took deep breaths as Anita led her around the garden to show her what was edible and what was a weed to be removed.

“All right, and now, we just want to pull up some carrots so we can get started on dinner. How does that sound?” Anita asked.

Cynthia nodded, ready to try something she couldn’t get wrong.

By the time they had the carrots washed, it was getting close to dinner. Cynthia started cooking and Anita finished her mending.

However, although the food was ready sooner, it was nearly eight in the evening when Ray came inside. By then, Cynthia was exhausted.

She was exhausted both physically and emotionally, but she tried to hide it. He was in such a good mood, she didn’t want to show her despair.

“Well, It looks like Ma and Mark are planning to eat outside for the next week or so. But this looks wonderful, as well. I had no idea you’d be such a great cook,” he said, grinning.

Although she appreciated the compliment, she was still overcome by her mistakes.

The last thing Cynthia had anticipated at dinner was for the conversation to truly shift and give way to a deeper side of Ray.

“You know, I’m impressed by you. You’ve done so much in one day,” he said. Cynthia hadn’t yet mentioned her mistake in the garden but assumed his mother had told him.

“I know I work too much and too hard—at least, that’s what everyone else tells me. I tend to try to push myself because my pa was so good at running the ranch and I don’t want to disappoint his memory,” he said.

“Because of that, I work more than I have the energy to do. In fact, it was because I worked so hard that I found myself bedridden for two weeks.

“That was when Ma gave me the paper to look for a wife.”

“Really?” she asked, surprised by this knowledge.

“It’s true. She had me search for someone because she hoped that it would give me a chance to settle and rest. I didn’t want to slow down at all, but I know she was right.

“I needed to do it. I had to take time to look after myself,” he said.

“I never would have known. That’s truly remarkable,” she said.

“It’s a good thing it happened or I wouldn’t have had the chance to meet you, and that would make me very sad, to be honest,” he said.

For a long moment, they were quiet, but Ray finally asked her a question.

“And what about you? Why did you decide to leave? I know you lived with a friend and you mentioned she was going to be married, but was there no one else for you to rely on?” he asked.

Cynthia didn’t want to share more about her past. It was difficult to talk about and she was ashamed, even now, by the fact that she had been abandoned after her father died.

Instead of going into any detail, she simply shook her head. “Because both of my parents were gone—and we didn’t have any other real family—Joyce and David were the only ones in my life.

“It was hard to say goodbye to them, but I no longer had a life in Connecticut,” she said.

Ray gave her a gentle look and she felt overwhelmingly fortunate to

have married someone who seemed to care about her and was so tender with her.

She didn't think she deserved it, but she was grateful.

After dinner, she did the dishes and, in her exhaustion, Cynthia then went to their room, expecting to fall asleep right away.

It seemed that her mind would not give her any rest. It replayed the incident in the garden again and again, how she'd torn up those little seedlings, the tomatoes Joyce had been so eager to harvest in a few months.

Cynthia didn't know much about planting, but she understood that even those two weeks mattered to Joyce, that it could be the difference between harvesting before the cold and not getting any tomatoes at all.

Eventually, Ray came in and laid next to her. Cynthia pretended to be asleep so he didn't know how her thoughts tormented her, but he was asleep in a matter of minutes while she still worried.

He had just told her how important the ranch was to him, but Cynthia had ruined the very first chore she attempted.

Was she cut out for this life? Was it possible that she could do anything right? Or was she doomed to make mistakes time and time again?

After the ordeal with the garden and a couple days of getting into the routine of her chores, Ray was glad when his mother had suggested that he give Cynthia a day away from the house and all the overwhelming tasks.

Ray was excited about taking Cynthia into town, eager to show her what a wonderful town it was. He hoped she would like it.

She seemed to appreciate the beauty of a rural life as opposed to one in the city and, for that, Ray was relieved. He wanted to ensure she didn't end up getting bored of everything there was to do without the occasional relief.

Although he knew he was bad at taking time for anything else, Ray didn't want to put Cynthia through that.

"And here is the general store," he said, ready to take her in to see what wares they had inside.

But before they reached the door, Ray sensed someone behind him and turned just in time to see Thomas standing there, approaching with keen interest.

"Well, hello there, Ray," he said. "And Miss Cynthia, you look even lovelier than the last time I saw you."

"Th-thank you," she said in a quiet voice, looking away.

It was obvious that Thomas was attracted to Cynthia, and Ray had no intention of putting up with that. Cynthia was his wife and he couldn't let Thomas act like this with her.

It wasn't right that he would be so bold and brash, pushing his way into their business.

Ray tried to keep his anger under control. He couldn't let his fury show or get in the way of taking care of Cynthia.

Although this was deeply personal to him and he didn't want to risk showing how much he detested Thomas, he also needed to find a way to ensure Thomas wasn't going to cross any other boundaries.

Of course, he was still holding it against Thomas how things had gone the last time they spoke. Thomas had been far too familiar with Cynthia then as well, trying to make Ray look bad and encouraging her to avoid the marriage.

It had been a mistake to introduce Cynthia to Thomas, a matter of his pride. He wouldn't let his pride get the best of him now.

If he was going to show Cynthia that he was a good man, he would have to stand firm and keep himself calm.

"I hope I'm not bothering the two of you, but I wanted to come and say hello," Thomas said.

"Which you have now done," Ray replied tersely with a false smile.

"Indeed, I suppose I have, but now that I'm here, I find that I can't quite tear myself away. It is still a wonder to me that you managed to find such a lovely woman to marry.

"Remind me, how many days ago was that?" Thomas asked.

"Four," Ray replied, a true smile breaking through. He looked at Cynthia with pride, glad that she was his wife.

"I see. Well, it's a shame that she's still a free woman," Thomas said.

Seeing the trap but unable to stop himself from running into it, Ray took the bait Thomas was offering.

"What do you mean by that? She's not a free woman. I have just told you that we're married," Ray said, taking Cynthia's hand and stepping protectively forward.

He wasn't going to let Thomas get between them or make her feel more uncomfortable than he already had.

"Yes, you had a wedding, but that is not what constitutes a marriage," Thomas pointed out.

"What do you mean? Of course that constitutes a marriage," Ray hissed.

"To my knowledge, a marriage is not official until there has been... how shall I put this delicately? Of course, there is the act of joining together and, without such, a woman is still free to leave her husband if she so chooses," Thomas said.

A cruel grin spread across his face and, for a moment, Ray was too stunned to say anything.

He couldn't believe Thomas would go so far as to speak about the consummation of his marriage like that. It was a shocking thing to say, particularly when Cynthia was standing right there.

In that moment of silent surprise, Ray glanced at Cynthia to see the look of horror in her expression. Rather than blushing, her face was entirely drained of color.

Her humiliation was evident and Ray knew he couldn't resist any longer.

"You mind your own business!" Ray shouted. He let go of Cynthia's

hand and stepped forward, aggressively.

His hands balled into fists and he felt he could pummel Thomas's face until it was bloodied and unrecognizable, but that had never been the sort of man he was.

Nevertheless, the temptation was fierce. He sensed that Thomas was hoping for this, that he wanted Ray to prove himself a loose cannon, that he couldn't handle something as small as an insult.

But this had gone too far. This insult was unbelievable and it had embarrassed Cynthia in addition to himself.

Thomas put his hands up in defense, as though he would rather be a peacemaker than fight with Ray. It was a manipulative way to make himself look better after such an awful exchange.

"Please, don't hurt me. I didn't mean to offend you, I was simply giving your wife the option. Now, if I am wrong in my assessment, perhaps I overstepped.

"I simply didn't think you would push your new wife into that sort of position so soon after bringing her here," Thomas said, snidely.

At that, Ray grabbed Thomas by the collar and pulled him so they were nose to nose. He gritted his teeth and looked Thomas square in the eye.

"You stay out of my household affairs or you will find yourself in desperate need of the doctor," Ray threatened.

Thomas raised an eyebrow and looked amused, as though he knew Ray would never follow through on the threat. But before allowing Thomas to get in another word, Ray let him go, forcefully releasing him so that Thomas had to quickly find his feet to stop himself from falling backwards.

Ray grabbed Cynthia by the hand and pulled her along in the opposite

direction of the general store, leading her back to where the buckboard was waiting for them.

He was moving quickly and sensed that she was struggling to keep up, but in his fury, he couldn't slow down until they were far away from Thomas and didn't have to face him again.

At last, they reached the buckboard and Ray turned. Thomas was nowhere to be seen.

He let go of Cynthia's hand and noted how she took a small step back away from him, clearly frightened by his behavior.

"I'm sorry about that," he said, not looking at her directly.

She was quiet and he didn't know how to address what she had just seen from him.

How could he admit his sheer hatred for Thomas? How could he tell her what their history was like and why it mattered so much that Thomas acted that way?

Ray took a few moments to cool off, to let himself be angry and then to let it go. He wasn't sure what else to do or how to overcome what he was feeling, but he couldn't put Cynthia through this any longer than the twenty minutes or so that he already had.

"I really didn't mean for you to get in the middle of that. I wish he would just keep his mouth shut instead of feeling entitled to say those things," he said.

"I understand," she replied in a small voice.

"It's not fair that you had to deal with that, and with my reaction. You see, there's more to it than just the incidents you've seen," he told her.

She waited for him to go on and explain what he meant and, although he knew she was just trying to be polite, Ray wished she would say

something. He was deeply uncomfortable with the anger she had seen from him and could tell she had been startled.

“Thomas is my business rival,” he said. “We have the largest ranches in town and, until a few weeks ago, I was the one with the largest.

“But Thomas has pretty strong business dealings and he has managed to outdo me, which is difficult. He knows how to push my pride better than anyone. He also knows how important it is to me that I keep the ranch as successful as my father did—if not even more so.

“Anyway, that’s why Thomas and I don’t get along. We both want to be the best. I’m not always a hothead, but Thomas knows how to push me into that position even when I think I’m beyond it.

“Somehow, he knows what to do in order to ruin my patience,” he confessed.

“I understand,” she finally said.

Cynthia didn’t seem overly curious to learn more and she stayed quiet as if trying to be patient and polite, but Ray sensed there was more to it. He could tell that she was bothered by having seen him like that and he could hardly blame her for it.

After all, he had been far too angry for his own good and there was a reason Thomas had been able to knock him down. If he had just been calm when he needed to be, things wouldn’t be quite so strained with him and Cynthia now.

He was ashamed he had let it get to this point, but it was too late to go back. He had made a mistake and it was done.

“And I know Thomas was too forward with you. While he obviously sees that you’re beautiful and he’s interested in you, he’s also just trying to get to me. When he says such brash things, it’s because he wants me to feel like I’m not a real man.

“You have to trust that I’m not going to be the sort of fella who would be unkind to a woman just for the sake of that aspect of my pride,” he said, trying to be vague enough not to embarrass her further while still getting his point across.

Cynthia simply nodded, still not responding much to what he was saying or showing any real reaction over what had just taken place.

Although he knew that it shouldn’t bother him, Ray couldn’t help wondering if Cynthia was being quiet because she was still uncomfortable or if she was unresponsive because she was actually thinking about Thomas.

Was it possible that she was interested in him? Ray didn’t want to consider it, but he couldn’t help wondering.

If there was even the slightest chance that Cynthia liked Thomas, Ray didn’t think he would be able to handle it. How could he possibly respond to something like that?

Against his better judgment, he was furious. He realized he had allowed himself to get caught up in the frustration and jealousy that Thomas was trying to lure him into, but he just couldn’t help it.

How was he meant to stop himself from feeling that way? How could he possibly stay calm when Thomas had been so unbearably bold as to suggest Cynthia come to him?

And how could Cynthia not rush to reassure Ray that she would never do that?

Once more, he remembered he didn’t know her very well.

It was a moment in which he felt ashamed he had allowed himself to grow strong feelings for her so quickly when, in truth, there was every chance Cynthia didn’t have feelings for him in return.

She had only been at the ranch for a few days and they had been busy

doing work for much of that time.

Although Ray thought they had gotten along well, he had to admit to himself that maybe he was only hoping for that and, it was possible, there was really nothing special between them at all.

It could all be on his side alone and she might not see him as anything more than the man who got her out of Connecticut and gave her a place to stay.

These thoughts plagued Ray throughout the day and, once they got back to the ranch, he threw himself back into his work, leaving Cynthia to figure out what chores she needed to do.

It was better this way, giving her some time and space.

Or maybe that was just what Ray told himself.

Cynthia had been in Montana for nearly two weeks when she and Ray decided to go back into town together.

They had been civil with one another, even sharing a little bit more about their lives and how they were happy to be married. And they were still eating alone together to give them that time, which she appreciated.

But Cynthia was still struggling with many things about her new life. She found herself confused by Ray at times, wondering what kind of man he was and whether or not he really was happy to have her there or if he was just trying to prove himself worthy of having a wife.

And she still didn't know what to think about his rivalry with Thomas. The last thing she wanted was for Ray to be upset, but she wished he would just shrug off Thomas's attitude.

Why did he have to get so upset over it?

Regardless of these stains on their new marriage, Cynthia focused on the positives. She was starting to do better with her chores and hadn't made quite as many mistakes—aside from dropping a horseshoe on the basket of eggs one morning, cracking them and making a huge mess.

And she did like Ray. Whatever things about him confused her, she thought highly of him, noting that he was a kind, hardworking man.

It was difficult to get to know him outside of their mealtimes because he was always so busy, but she liked what she had seen so far aside from his relationship with Thomas.

“You want to come in, or should I go on ahead and look around?” Ray asked, heading for the general store.

“I’m all right out here,” she replied. “I wouldn’t mind seeing what sort of shops there are.”

“Of course. You go on ahead and I’ll come find you when I’m finished,” he said.

Ray went to the general store and Cynthia decided to wander nearby, taking a look in the shop windows as she went along. When she reached the shoe shop, Cynthia paused and looked in the window at the lovely shoes.

There was a pair of blue boots that had a small heel and rose up along the ankle with buttons on the outsides. They were striking, probably made from lambskin as far as she could tell.

Cynthia swooned as she looked at them, wondering what it would be like to own something so nice. She had never been the sort of woman who craved wealth and fashion, but it was different when she was eyeing something that would be such a treat to have.

With a sigh, she turned away, only to bump right into Thomas.

He stood there, gazing at her with mischief in his eyes. They were the same height and Cynthia held her head high in an effort to be taller than him.

He smirked, as if knowing exactly what she was trying to do, and mimicked her posture.

“Would you like me to buy them for you?” he asked.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked, stiffening. Cynthia wondered what this man wanted and why he was so bold.

"The shoes. Would you like them? I can go inside and buy them for you. Just come in with me and be sure they are the right size for you," he said.

"Thank you, but if I need anything at all, my husband will take care of me," Cynthia said, taking a step forward.

Thomas blocked her path, trying to appear innocent in his advances. "I hope this is not out of line," he began. "I trust you are a very loyal woman, which I am glad for.

"However, you ought to know by now that Ray will never stop working long enough to notice his wife might want something. In fact, he will never stop working long enough to care about anyone in his life."

Cynthia took a ragged breath in, hating that Thomas had said that. Of all the things in the world for him to point out, he had chosen this.

She wished he wouldn't be so bold as to make that sort of statement, but it was true and she knew it. Ray didn't stop working, not for even a moment.

Their mealtimes, which ought to have been precious, were often rushed. He scarcely took the time to notice her unless he had to and it was a bitterness that she had been fighting against.

This horrible man was bringing it to light, against everything she knew was right.

"You clearly don't know Ray like I do," she said, contrary to her thoughts. Cynthia didn't care if Thomas was right. Her duty was to defend her husband.

He may have been a flawed man, but she liked him and she wasn't

going to let this fork-tongued flatterer try and sway her to say anything different.

Suddenly, however, Thomas's eyes shifted and he looked at her with compassion.

It was the last thing Cynthia had expected to see from him and she blinked twice to be sure she wasn't imagining it. But there it was, a gentleness, a sudden hint that he understood her pain.

"If you ever need anything, no matter what it is, you can come to me," he said.

Cynthia's lips parted and she knew she ought to tell him to go away and leave her alone, but she was struck by his change. She didn't know what to say or how to get rid of him now.

"I do like to push Ray sometimes," he admitted. "He's so tense all the time and it's difficult to ignore that when I find it amusing to irritate him, but that has nothing to do with you.

"And I apologize if I was wrong for having said something so bold before about your marriage."

She looked away, feeling the threat of a blush in her cheeks. She didn't want Thomas to bring that up again, even if it was in an apology.

"I shouldn't have put you in that position and I regret it. I regretted it immediately, and not because it upset Ray but because I embarrassed you and that was wrong of me," he said.

"Thank you for your apology, but I would like it if you stay away from me," she said.

"I know. I understand that. Honestly, if it weren't for the fact that I'm worried about you, I wouldn't have come over and I know I've been obnoxious in how I've spoken of Ray and all that.

"You're probably furious with me, as you should be. Any good wife would be," he said.

"That's true," she agreed.

"But if you will just give me the chance to prove that I'm not a terrible man after all, I would appreciate it. Of course, I'm not asking you to leave Ray or for anything of the sort.

"I'm only asking that you bear in mind what I said," he told her.

"You've said a lot of things," Cynthia replied, trying to remain cold toward him.

Thomas laughed and nodded. "Yes, I suppose I have. But I want you to remember the part about me being here for anything.

"You still have options, and I mean that. I'm only a few miles away," he said.

For a moment, Thomas looked at her with those same empathetic eyes.

At last, he turned and walked away, a strangely humble sloping in his shoulders. It felt as though he was suddenly a completely different man from the one she had met previously.

Cynthia watched him go and wondered what had just taken place. Did Thomas mean it? Was he a nicer man than she had thought? Or was he just trying to manipulate her?

If he was being manipulative, he was very good at it. She had a feeling Thomas would be proud to know he had cast doubts in her mind as far as whether or not he was being genuine.

But if he was, if he really did mean to be there for her in case Ray ever abandoned her, maybe she needed to bear it in mind in case she found herself in a desperate circumstance.

Cynthia looked around, thankful there weren't too many people out in the town at that time of day. She looked toward the general store, knowing that Ray would be coming out any minute.

It had been lucky for Thomas that he hadn't been caught, but Cynthia wondered what she should do about it.

If she told Ray, she knew he would be angry and even jealous. He had already proven that.

Moreover, what if it meant that he wouldn't let her come into town anymore? If the two times they had come they had been accosted by Thomas, eventually Ray would forbid it.

She needed the visits to town and wanted them more often for the sake of her own peace of mind. It was difficult being at the ranch all the time with her many responsibilities.

Having a chance to come here and look around and be free was too wonderful to give up.

Cynthia didn't know what would happen if Ray said she couldn't come anymore.

"Oh, Cynthia..." she scolded herself, wishing she hadn't given Thomas the chance to talk to her like that.

The main thing that made her hesitant to tell Ray was that she didn't want him so upset that he might use it as a reason to leave her.

He could accuse her of flirting or say she wasn't worth the effort of battling with Thomas.

And yet, Cynthia knew she couldn't keep a secret, either. If she couldn't hide what had taken place, there was really no point in trying.

She saw Ray coming out of the general store and her heart thumped

with worry. She felt nauseous.

But as he drew near, he smiled at her and held up a couple of sacks with whatever tools it was that he'd gone in to buy. She smiled back at him and Ray came up close.

"All right, so I have everything I need aside from the lumber, but that's not going to be too tough to get a hold of. Mark and I will be busy later on today, trying to get a few trees chopped down for it and then we just need to get to work on it so that it's ready for the new fence," he said.

"Of course. Ray, I—"

"And then there's also the netting," he said, shaking his head in frustration.

"I forgot about the netting. We'll have to go to Mr. Creswell to pick that up. He's got the best stuff in town," Ray said, continuing on in his thoughts.

Cynthia knew him well enough by now to understand that he was always thinking about his many projects and there wasn't much she could say or do to interrupt him. Still, she felt that it was important to make him stop long enough that she could tell him what had happened.

"Ray—"

"Oh, I'm sorry, you probably want to get back. Here I am, going on and on about the other stops we need to make, and I'm sure you're ready to get home.

"But don't worry, it's only going to be a few more minutes," he said, putting everything in the buckboard and climbing up into his seat.

At last he paused, waiting for Cynthia to come up and sit beside him.

“What is it?” he asked, noticing her hesitancy.

“Ray, I’m sorry, but there’s something that I need to tell you,” she said.

He looked at her with worry in his eyes.

“What happened?”

Cynthia could barely meet his eyes and Ray knew this was already a sign something bad had taken place. She was acting strange, and he had been so eager to talk to her that he hadn't at first realized her discomfort, but once she started to speak, it quickly became clear.

"Cynthia? What is it?" Ray asked, pressing her again.

"While you were in town, that man came to me again. The one you don't get along with," she said.

"Thomas?" Ray asked, his skin prickling with rage.

"Yes, him. He spoke to me," she said.

Fury roared through Ray's veins and he couldn't believe Thomas would do this yet again. How could he be such a menace as to come to Cynthia and act this way?

Why had he thought it was appropriate to come to her like this?

He couldn't believe this was happening again. Something had to be done about it. There was no way he would allow Thomas to keep coming after Cynthia like this.

Not only was it a disrespect to Ray, but it was also a disrespect to Cynthia for Thomas to use her like this. Ray wouldn't stand for it.

"That's it," he growled. "I've had enough of that man. It's time I take

care of him once and for all.

“I’m not going to stand by and let him ruin everything I’ve worked for. He has come after me again and again!”

Ray kicked at the dust and Cynthia took a step back from him. He didn’t want to frighten her, but he couldn’t hold back any longer.

“Please, Ray, just calm down,” Cynthia asked him, the quiver in her voice alerting him to the fact that she was deeply uncomfortable with his anger.

Ray tried to take a deep breath, to calm himself in any way possible, but he just couldn’t help it anymore. Full of anger and fury, there was nothing more he could do but let it out.

“How am I supposed to calm down?” he demanded. “How can I possibly be calm when Thomas is coming after you like this, again and again?”

“You want me to just put up with that? What kind of man do you think I am?”

Cynthia took a step back, her eyes wide with fright. Ray could see that he had scared her, but he wasn’t sure what to do. He couldn’t help it that he was so angry and knew in his heart he had every right to be mad.

What Thomas had done was absolutely wrong. It was ungentlemanly and proved he was an awful man.

And yet, the last thing he wanted was to frighten his wife. Seeing the expression on her face, her lips parted slightly as though ready to scream, her body tense and ready to run, Ray had to calm himself.

He had to focus on what mattered the most. Sure, he would eventually have his revenge on Thomas, but that was not going to happen today.

“Cynthia,” he said, clearing his throat. He was still so angry that it was difficult to restrain himself and Ray thought he would burst again at any moment.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you. I simply can’t let him get away with this. I hope you understand that I won’t hurt you, but I need to make sure Thomas doesn’t keep acting this way.”

“I know that and I wasn’t trying to upset you, but I had to tell you,” Cynthia said.

“You did the right thing,” he replied.

“To be honest, I didn’t feel right hiding it from you that another man spoke to me. Nevertheless, I don’t want you to be so upset.

“I hope you know I’m not going to do anything to compromise your honor or mine. I just thought you needed to know,” she said.

“I’m glad for that, but it doesn’t change the fact that Thomas knows better than this. You don’t understand, Cynthia. This is just the kind of thing that man does.

“He knows it will get under my skin and that’s frustrating, but it’s not nearly as bad as the fact that he really believed it was acceptable for him to come to you that way.

“He should have known you wouldn’t respond and since he thought you might, it shows he’s either more brash than I thought or that...”

Ray trailed off, not wanting to accuse Cynthia of anything. But was it possible? Was Thomas acting that way because he thought Cynthia might really be interested in him?

That was an awful thing to consider, but maybe it was what Thomas believed. Ray had to ask himself why Thomas might think that and whether it could be true.

He pushed the idea away and decided to focus on what mattered.

Ray had to believe that Cynthia would be loyal to him, and all he needed to know right now was that she was all right and could handle the difficulty Thomas had put her through.

“I want you to stay away from that man, Cynthia. I don’t trust him around you and it’s my responsibility to protect you from people like that,” he said.

There was a flash of offense across her face, but it quickly dissipated and she simply nodded in understanding. Ray looked around the town, relieved it wasn’t busy at that time in the afternoon and no one else had seen his outburst.

He was, however, determined to find Thomas and have a chat with him as soon as possible. This had to be put to an end.

“He’s out to ruin me, Cynthia. I know you’re new in town and you may not realize it, but Thomas is a bad man and it’s best for us both if you don’t have to interact with him again.

“I hope you don’t think I’m overreacting, but he really is a bad fella. I don’t want you mixed up with him,” Ray said.

“I understand,” she replied.

Her expression was resigned and it was clear she meant what she said. Nevertheless, understanding wasn’t the same as knowing the full extent as to why Ray was so passionate about it.

Maybe it was his own fault he hadn’t told her more clearly, but he had to do whatever he could to protect her and Thomas was making it very hard to do that.

“All right, well, we should go on ahead back to the ranch. We need to get all of this taken care of,” Ray said, looking at the items he had thrown in the back of the buckboard.

The best thing he could do was get home and think about all of this while he got some work done. He didn't want to keep mulling it over while standing there with Cynthia, who was clearly bothered by his response to the matter.

No matter what, Ray figured he wouldn't win against Thomas if he couldn't keep a level head in all of this.

A level head was important when it came to besting Thomas. Without patience and a calm mindset, Ray wouldn't be able to prove himself anyway.

If, however, Ray was smart about it and proved himself to Cynthia first and foremost, he would eventually show Thomas that Ray would always succeed.

"Are you all right?" he asked Cynthia before they left town.

"I am. I just wish you didn't have a reason to be upset," she said. "I know whatever there is between the two of you, it has made you pretty unhappy, and it grieves me that you struggle to get along with him.

"I wish there could be peace between the two of you. It seems to me it's all a matter of pride."

Ray tried not to show how bothered he was that she saw it as a matter of pride. Sure, maybe it was in some ways, but that didn't matter.

It wasn't fair that she thought he was just being prideful. This was a matter of her honor, and his as well.

"I understand that you don't want me to be at odds with him, but I don't think you realize the full extent of what's between me and Thomas. It isn't a simple matter of masculine pride, you know.

"He came after you, and that's not something that I can let slide. You're my wife and it's up to me to defend you and stop men like that

from treating you as if you're nothing more than entertainment for them. You deserve better," he said.

"And I am truly grateful that you value me, but I also wish to put all of this behind us and no longer be concerned about it. I am honestly quite happy to move on and forget him," she said.

"I'm glad to hear that, but you should know I take this very seriously. You shouldn't have to suffer at his hands and I won't let you," Ray said.

Cynthia nodded and looked down, clearly not wanting to argue the point any longer.

Certainly Ray felt bad for being so insistent about it, but he needed her to know she was more important than this. He had to prove he was a good husband who could properly look after his wife.

Ray took her hand in his and she looked up and smiled at him at last. He couldn't deny that he was really starting to like her. She was sweet and gentle, kind and hardworking.

Sure, she'd struggled a bit with learning the ways of the ranch, but she wasn't giving up and he was truly impressed by her efforts.

Nevertheless, Ray understood there was a lot at stake for them. If Thomas was going to continue pushing like this, it meant Ray and Cynthia would have to try that much harder to prove they could be together.

He would have to fight to be the kind of husband who protected his wife, and she would have to be the kind of wife who respected the honor of her husband.

He still didn't know if she was starting to like him or not, and that was a frightening question.

Although Ray wanted to believe that Cynthia cared about him, he

didn't have any way to be sure without asking her, and he didn't feel that they knew one another well enough yet for him to be so bold. It was a difficult position to be in.

Still, Ray wanted to do the right thing and, for now, it seemed the right thing was to leave Cynthia alone and ask her about it another time.

If they each had some space to work through their thoughts, it would be better than him pouncing on her for answers and risking the chance that she might be frustrated with him.

He would need to talk to Thomas about it all soon enough, anyway. That was even more important than talking to Cynthia, he figured.

With Cynthia, he needed to tread lightly, but with Thomas, he could unleash all of his fury and give his rival a piece of his mind. Doing that would feel so good.

By the time they reached the house, Ray was starting to feel a little bit calmer, but it wouldn't take much to get him riled up again. He just had to focus on Cynthia if he was going to be at peace.

"I hope you aren't too worried about things," he said as they got down from the buckboard.

"I'm all right, Ray. I know you're upset, but you ought to remember that I have lived an awful lot of my life without a protector," she said.

"What does that mean?" Ray asked, thinking her words an insult.

"It means you have to remember I can handle myself when someone like Thomas comes around and tries to mess things up for me. I appreciate that you want to be my refuge in the midst of it, but I didn't tell you so you could charge in and protect me.

"I told you because it was the right thing to do. And I hope you can now do the right thing and keep yourself peaceful," she said, her voice

carrying undertones of warning.

It was clear to Ray that Cynthia meant what she said. She didn't anticipate any further disagreements between the men.

She had a no-nonsense approach that he appreciated, but that didn't change Ray's primary concern through it all. He competed with Thomas over everything in life.

Did he now have to compete over his bride?

Cynthia gently lifted the little seedling so it was standing straight, but the moment she pulled her finger away again, it fell sideways.

“Let’s bury it a little deeper,” Anita said.

“But I’ve already buried it. Can it really survive being dug up all over again?” Cynthia asked.

“Tomatoes are very forgiving creatures,” Anita said with a smile.

Cynthia observed her mother-in-law as she softly coaxed the plant out of the dirt again.

It had just a few of its true leaves, enough that Cynthia had hope it might survive in spite of her constant battles with the tomato and all its friends.

“I don’t know how you do it, Anita. I’m out here every day and the plants don’t change, but you come out for an hour every few days and suddenly, by nightfall, they’re all thriving,” Cynthia said.

“I would know nothing about working in a factory,” Anita replied.

“I could spend all day, every day staring at the machinery and not have the slightest idea what to do. You would be able to walk in and rescue whatever I happened to be working on. I’m sure of it.”

“It’s not as easy as that. I wish I could be better, that I knew what to do when it really counts,” Cynthia said.

“You’re learning. You didn’t expect to be an expert at once, did you?” Anita asked with a laugh.

In truth, Cynthia had thought she would pick up the gardening much faster than she had.

After all, so many people in the world still depended on growing their own food. It had to be easy enough to figure out.

But it wasn’t. She had encountered many failures, even after the uprooting of everything she thought was a weed.

Now, she was trying to figure out how to put things together in a way that made sense, despite the fact that none of it was clear. She simply wished she could touch the plants the way Anita did, that she could watch them grow so easily.

She dug a deeper hole and let the seedling sink down so the true leaves were barely above the dirt. Gently patting the soil, she made sure it was secure.

“Here you are, my dear. You’ve done it!” Anita exclaimed.

Cynthia smiled, proud that she had managed to achieve something, no matter how small a feat it was. “Tomatoes are forgiving, you say?” she asked with hope.

“Much more than people,” Anita replied, looking her in the eye.

Cynthia froze and looked away. It was clear Anita wanted to speak with her about something more serious, but she didn’t know exactly what that might be.

“I’m not sure what it is you’re holding against yourself, but you need to let it go,” Anita said.

Cynthia felt a wave of relief wash over her and she exhaled the tension in her shoulders. At last, it seemed someone understood her without Cynthia having to be the one who spoke about it first.

“I’m not sure if you’re bothered by something that happened before you came here or after, but I know Ray cares about you very much and so do I. You are a part of our family, Cynthia.

“We appreciate you and we are glad to have you here,” Anita said.

“Thank you,” she replied, feeling as if Anita had no idea just how much Cynthia was holding onto.

“Ray seems to really like you, but I know you have seen a side of him that even I am not proud of,” Anita continued.

“I know he just wants to take care of me,” Cynthia said.

“It’s ego. Men have egos like this and we females have to sit back and watch them, wishing we could shake them and tell them to let go.

“I know you are a strong woman and you’ve had to look after yourself often enough. If I could convince Ray to let go of his anger toward Thomas, I would do so in a heartbeat,” Anita said.

“I don’t think I can get him to have peace with Thomas, but I do want him to have peace with me and to know that I am happy to be his wife. I am loyal to him,” she said.

“He knows that. You never have to doubt it. I just want you to be free to do whatever you must in order to feel fulfilled on the ranch even outside of your marriage.

“For instance, I’m sure that even if you are enjoying learning how to garden, there must be other things you want to try,” Anita said.

Cynthia smiled sheepishly and gave a small shrug.

“All right, now you have to tell me what that means. It’s clear you’ve had something on your mind,” Anita teased.

“I’ve thought it would be useful for me to learn how to ride a horse. I’m anxious about it, and I would be scared. But I would also be excited and I know it would be helpful,” Cynthia confessed.

Grinning with delight, Anita nodded eagerly. “It would be. I think it’s an excellent idea and you should certainly learn how to ride.

“A skill like that would be useful around here for times when Ray and Mark are busy elsewhere. I only ride if I absolutely must, now that my back gives me such pain,” she said.

“Then I would truly like to develop a skill for riding. Do you think Ray would be able to teach me?” Cynthia asked.

Anita winced and shook her head. “To be honest, I think you’ll have to take the initiative for yourself.

“I will give you instructions as best I can, and I’m sure Ray and Mark will tell you things now and then if they see you working at it, but I wouldn’t expect Ray to be the one to come to you and suggest you learn,” she said.

Although it bothered Cynthia, Anita was right. It was clear Ray would not slow down in his work long enough to do much to help her.

She couldn’t pretend that she was all right with it, but she didn’t want to show that it upset her, either. Why couldn’t her husband actually take time to be with her?

It made no sense at all. He had arranged for her to come, saying he wanted a wife. But he didn’t seem to care now that he had one.

Cynthia yawned, despite herself, and tried to cover her mouth.

“Tired?” Anita asked.

“It’s nothing. I’ve just been keeping busy,” she replied.

“Another byproduct of my son’s efforts?” Anita asked.

“Ray does work very hard,” Cynthia said, letting that be her only acknowledgment of what Anita had said.

“Yes, he does. Since his father died, he hasn’t stopped. His work is his greatest passion, but I wish he would slow down,” Anita said.

After a long pause, she looked up with sudden excitement. “I have an idea,” she said.

“Oh?”

“You will need to take the initiative to learn to ride, but if you ask Ray for a lesson each day and if I urge him to do it as well, I have no doubt he would be willing.

“It’s one thing if he’s the one who sees it’s a good idea but doesn’t do anything about it. It is quite another if he has the both of us asking him to give you this opportunity,” Anita said.

Cynthia appreciated that idea. A part of her had assumed Ray would be no more swayed by the both of them than he would be by his own idea.

If Anita thought they could talk him into it, Cynthia thought it was an excellent option.

“Honestly, this will give Ray something else to do,” Anita said. “It would be healthy for him to focus on something other than his usual work and I like the idea.

“I will speak with him and tell him that you are expecting a lesson today and every day.”

“Really? Right away?” Cynthia asked.

“Absolutely,” Anita said, determination taking hold of her demeanor.

It was clear she was desperate for something to distract Ray from his work, and this was the best idea she’d come up with.

Cynthia hoped it would give her and Ray a chance to spend time together and get to know one another, all while making her more useful around the farm.

She wanted to prove to him that she could learn new things and handle herself without anyone having to supervise her tasks and make sure she didn’t ruin things.

It had certainly been difficult to adjust, but since she hardly ever saw her husband, she was also worried that she wasn’t able to keep him interested in her. And if Ray were to lose interest in her, Cynthia feared that it might mean she had made a mistake in coming here.

It was possible Ray wouldn’t want anything to do with her and he would send her away. Of course, then she would have nowhere to go.

After Linda May had abandoned her, Cynthia had struggled to believe anyone in her life would ever stay with her. She didn’t hold it against Joyce for leaving, but it had only been another moment of seeing the way most people would move on from her eventually.

Now, she couldn’t help wondering if Ray would leave her as well. Since he had hardly gotten to know her, there was no way to tell if he actually liked her.

And if he didn’t like her, what would happen?

“Cynthia?” Anita asked.

Cynthia’s head popped up and she looked at Anita in surprise, having completely forgotten that they were in the middle of a conversation.

“Are you all right?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Cynthia replied. “I was just thinking about riding horses. It’s going to be very new for me, but I’m quite excited.”

“You don’t look excited. You look... concerned. Are you sure everything is fine?”

“I’m sure. It will be a great experience,” she said.

“Very well. In that case, I’ll speak with Ray this afternoon and we’ll get you started on your lessons. I really do think you’ll love it, but I know it’s going to be an adjustment.

“Maybe you can spend some time with the horses first. There’s one in particular you will like,” Anita said, gesturing for Cynthia to follow her.

She led Cynthia to the stables and, once they were inside, they made their way along the stalls.

One of the horses let out a gruff sound, like she either wanted to clear her throat or give Cynthia a threat and Cynthia wasn’t too sure which it was.

“Here she is,” Anita said. “This is Lulu. She’s one of my favorite horses we’ve ever had. Incredibly docile and sweet. You’ll like her.”

Cynthia smiled at the paint mare, taking in the patterns of brown and white across her petite frame.

“She’s lovely,” Cynthia said. Just then, Lulu took a step forward and put her head down, as though waiting for Cynthia to pet her.

“You can touch her. She likes people,” Anita said.

Cynthia did as instructed, running her hand up and down Lulu’s neck. She was surprised by the softness of her coat, and how gentle the mare was.

“She seems to approve of you,” Anita told her.

“You think so?” Cynthia asked.

“I do. And I’m not surprised. You have very similar temperaments,” she said.

“How so?” Cynthia asked, turning to Anita again.

“You’re both quiet and gentle, but it’s clear that you need someone in your life who will be there for you. Lulu needs companionship as often as possible, and I think maybe you haven’t always had quite what you hope for in that area, as well,” Anita said, intuitively.

Cynthia looked away in shame. Was it so obvious? Was her pain clear to everyone who met her?

“It’s all right, Cynthia,” Anita said. “I just hope you know how happy we are to have you here. We say it a lot, but I want you to know that we mean it.

“And don’t let Ray’s constant distractions on the farm fool you. He likes having you here as well. You’ll see that in time.”

Cynthia hoped she was right. The days were moving along and she still didn’t know her husband well, but that didn’t mean she would never start to know him.

She had to hold onto that hope, even when she felt utterly hopeless.

This marriage wasn’t a lost cause. She wouldn’t allow herself to believe that. If nothing more, it could be a partnership and a friendship.

Of course, Cynthia wanted more, but she could settle for that.

And maybe, if she was ever so fortunate, one day it could even be love.

Mending the roof of the henhouse wouldn't take too long and

Ray wanted to tackle the job before he got started on some of the other things he needed to do. He was supposed to start teaching Cynthia to ride that day but had a strong feeling he wouldn't be able to get to it quite yet.

His mother would be angry, but he didn't have much of a choice. There was just so much that needed to be taken care of.

"Ray?"

He turned and saw Mark approaching, a look of worry in his eyes. Ray knew this couldn't be good.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I was in town a little while ago to talk to Henry about the supplies we need for the shoeing, and I was surprised to hear a few things about you while I was there," he said.

"What do you mean? What did you hear about me?" Ray asked, concerned.

"There was talk in town about you finding a wife, how you had to go out and order one from the paper. They were saying you had to work hard to find her and you'll need to work hard to keep her.

"I know it's just talk and it's not the sort of thing I would pay any

mind to if it were about anyone else, but I can't stand for this kind of thing to be said about you," Mark said.

Ray was furious. He knew, without a doubt, that this was Thomas's doing.

"That fella is going to pay for this," he said.

"Who? Thomas? You think he's the one who's been saying it?" Mark asked.

"I'm sure of it. Who else would it be? You know he hates me and we've always had this rivalry.

"I'm not saying there's anything all right about it, but I have no doubt he's behind this and he's the one going out of his way to make me look bad in town.

"I need to make sure he doesn't keep at it," Ray said.

"What are you going to do? You can't stop him from going on like that.

"I don't even know what all he's saying and who he's saying it to, but Henry was giving me a warning about it and Mac Johnson asked me if it was true that you already had to beg her not to leave you.

"I promptly told him that's false and he'd best not repeat something so ridiculous," Mark said.

"Thank you for defending me, but you shouldn't have to. This is all Thomas's doing. I don't want to hear another word about that man and it's time that we put an end to all of this.

"If I don't confront him about these things, it'll never stop. You know that as well as I do. I can't bear to let him get away with it," Ray said.

"So, what are you planning to do? I know you're upset, but I told you

so you could be aware of it, not so you could charge in all angry. You should let it go, Ray.

“You should accept that this is happening and defend yourself in town, but there’s no reason to stand up to Thomas when we both know he isn’t worth your time or concern,” Mark said.

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re not the one he’s attacking. I bet if he starts coming after you, you won’t just sit by and do nothing. You would stand up to him.

“That’s what I need to do now. I can’t sit around while he’s talking about me like this and saying stuff that’s not true. And I don’t want him anywhere near Cynthia, either.

“He’s already come to her too many times and tried to drive us apart,” he said.

“Why would he do that? Doesn’t he know better than to go after your wife?” Mark asked.

“No. He doesn’t. And because of that, it’s time I talk to him about this,” Ray said.

“So, you’re going no matter what? There’s nothing I can do to stop you from confronting him?” Mark asked.

“Exactly,” Ray replied.

“If that’s so, I’m at least going with you. Maybe I can’t stop you from going, but I can stop you from doing something you’ll only regret later,” he said.

“If it means Thomas is the one paying the price, I won’t regret a single moment,” he said.

Ray meant it. He really couldn’t imagine having regret if anything bad happened to Thomas and he didn’t think Mark understood the extent

to which he detested Thomas.

All of this needed to come to an end, once and for all.

They made their way off the ranch and headed the short distance east to where Thomas lived on his vast, sprawling land. The property was remarkably large, much to Ray's dismay.

He didn't like having to even pass by Thomas's ranch, much less actually coming here intentionally. A part of Ray was certain he wouldn't get through this day without causing some real harm to Thomas.

"Are you ready, Ray? You need to have yourself together and make sure you don't let your emotions get the best of you," Mark warned.

"I'll do what I can," Ray said. "But I can't promise I'm going to be a gentleman.

"You know what he's like and if he's been going around town, talking about me and Cynthia, that's more than I can put up with."

Ray charged forward, letting Mark catch up to him. He stormed up to the door and knocked firmly.

More than likely, Thomas would be out and about on the ranch—he was taken aback when Thomas actually answered, a smug expression on his face when he saw Ray standing there.

"Well, hello," he said.

"Hello? Is that all you've got for me? What do you take me for?

"I don't know what kind of a man you think I am, but I've had just about enough of your constant nonsense, acting as though you're in charge of everything. You think I'm going to put up with that?" Ray asked, his fury coming on faster than he could stop it.

Thomas took a step back and feigned innocence.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Is this because I spoke with your wife? All I did was tell her that I’m here for her—in case you never are,” he said, a wicked grin spreading across his face.

Mark put a hand on Ray’s shoulder just as he tried to move forward, ready to attack. He balled his fists and restrained himself, no matter how desperately he wanted to unleash his rage.

“You stay away from Cynthia!” he shouted.

“I never meant to upset you by speaking with her. I simply thought she might need a friend in town, that’s all.

“If I had known you would be so angry about it, I would have refrained from going to her, but I truly thought I was just trying to be friendly.

“After all, everyone knows Ray Crocker can’t help himself from ignoring everyone around him while trying to work,” Thomas accused.

“That’s not true,” Ray said.

“I think it is. But what’s truly sad about it is that no matter how hard you try, you’ll *never* be able to provide for your family,” Thomas spat, the words coming out with venom as he tried to tear Ray down. “But don’t worry, Ray. I’m here. I can take care of Cynthia—and I’d like the chance to do so.”

At last, Ray could hold back no longer. His fist launched just in time for Mark to pull him back.

As he swung, he missed Thomas by a mere inch, ready to turn and punch Mark for getting in the way, although he knew he couldn’t do such a thing and he simply stumbled backward, embarrassed and angrier than ever.

Thomas laughed heartily at his expense. “Good heavens! I had no idea you would try something like that. Moreover, I didn’t know you would do it so poorly.

“Very well, then. At least now I’m aware that you’re no threat at all. You ought to be humiliated by that,” Thomas said, continuing to laugh until there were tears in his eyes.

“That’s enough, Ray,” Mark said, trying to pull him away.

Ray wasn’t nearly finished with Thomas, but he knew Mark was right. It was enough for now and he needed to take some time to recover from even this small interaction.

It had been a mistake to come here and confront Thomas when he wasn’t nearly in a position to do so.

“Come on,” Mark said, tightening his grip on Ray’s shoulder.

At last, Ray turned his back to Thomas and started walking, aware that he had possibly just made things worse and there was no chance that he would be able to undo it now.

“I’m sorry,” Ray grumbled as they climbed onto the buckboard.

“I know, but it was a mistake, Ray. You shouldn’t have gone after him like that. It’s enough that you know he wants to ruin your life, but you’ve just given him even more reason to.

“If you want to protect Cynthia, the best thing you can do is just stay away from him,” Mark warned.

“You wouldn’t have sat by if it had been you he was going after, or if it was a woman you’d just married,” he said.

“You’re right, I probably wouldn’t have, but that doesn’t matter right now. What matters is that we get you home and let you relax and think about what you’re going to do next.

“You can’t go after him again, not like this. Whatever you decide, it needs to be thought out and you need to take your time figuring out what exactly you want to do,” Mark said.

“I just don’t understand why he keeps coming after me and why it works every time,” Ray said, shaking his head in dismay.

“He’s figured out your weaknesses. Honestly, Ray, most people have. You’re a strong, brave, hardworking man, but it’s easy to see that those qualities can also be your downfall.

“I don’t want you in a position where you can’t get away from them. I want you to have the freedom to live your life, but you won’t be able to do so easily if you keep after him like this,” he said.

Ray wished he was better at hiding things. If Mark was right, which he likely was, Ray was making a fool of himself every single time he tried to come up against others.

He was only showing his own pride and how that led him into failure. Everything he was doing was wrong.

“This has to end, Mark. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but it has to come to an end sooner rather than later.

“That man has been out to tear me down since we were young men and he hasn’t relented. He’s only gotten worse over the years. What am I supposed to do now?

“You think I should just be patient? It’s not going to work that way,” he said.

“Ray, whatever happens, you have to let go,” Mark said.

“Let go of my failures or let go of Thomas’s efforts to ruin me? You think I can just move on when he won’t stop? What can I do?” he challenged his friend.

“You can remember that you’re better than this and your insecurities are only a result of having too much pride in your work,” Mark shot back, maneuvering the horses west.

“My work is all I have,” Ray retorted.

“If you really believe that, maybe you don’t deserve Cynthia or your mother. They’re there for you, Ray. Work isn’t all you have. The ranch is just something you do. It’s not who you are.

“It’s a part of you, sure, but it should be a small part—and when you make it such a big thing, it’s no wonder that you’re worked up all the time,” Mark said, scolding him.

Opening his mouth to speak, Ray was ready to argue back. But when he realized Mark was right, he closed his mouth again and took some time to consider what his friend had said.

Ray sighed, vowing to himself that he would be stronger and now let Thomas get the best of him. But even in that thought, he wondered if Thomas was right.

What if he would do a better job taking care of Cynthia than Ray did? What if all of Ray’s hard work wouldn’t be enough for her?

Did they mean that Ray was and always would be a failure?

Dinner smelled incredible and Cynthia hoped Ray would be happy with what she had put together. She wanted everything to be perfect while she tried to appease her husband and show him that she could be a good wife.

After hearing he'd gone to confront Thomas, Cynthia had known Ray may have started to question her loyalty to him. It seemed as though his pride had been wounded, which was the last thing she'd meant to do.

Ray came inside and she smiled to greet him.

"How are you?" she asked. "Did you finish the siding on the barn?"

"Thankfully, I did," he replied, not quite meeting her gaze. He seemed embarrassed and she thought he must still be upset after his confrontation.

"Well, have a seat. You must be exhausted. You worked really hard today. I hope you like what I've got for you for dinner," she said.

"It looks ideal," he replied, taking a seat. "You're a really great cook, you know. You always make such wonderful meals."

Cynthia was touched by the compliment and sat across from him with her plate.

"Thank you," she said. "I've been cooking for most of my life. It was

always a responsibility, especially living with other people who were always busy.”

“You don’t talk about that very much,” Ray said, much to her surprise. He had noticed her lack of confidence in sharing about her life?

“Well, it’s all in the past,” she said.

“But I’d like to know more about your family and the people who raised you,” he said.

“I think I told you that my mother and father both died,” she said.

“How old were you?”

Cynthia bit her lip for a moment. She’d known this conversation would come eventually. Somehow, she still wasn’t ready for it.

“My mother died shortly after I was born. My father didn’t talk about it much, but I think it was from getting sick after having me.

“And then, he remarried a few years later and then died when I was thirteen,” she said.

“That must have been difficult. You said you lived with a family friend, I thought. Did you live with your stepmother at all?” he asked.

She picked at the food on her plate and eyed it for a long moment.

“I lived with her for a short time before moving to live with Joyce, my neighbor,” she said.

“What happened to your stepmother?” he asked, his voice innocent with curiosity.

He wasn’t trying to push for answers, but was just asking kindly. There was nothing rude or pushy about it.

And yet, Cynthia ached at the thought of telling him.

How could she express what she had gone through? She feared the pity she might see in his eyes or that fact that it could even cause him to consider abandoning her now.

But she had no choice. He had asked her a question and it was time she told him.

“My stepmother didn’t want me,” she replied in a small voice. “She left me with Joyce one day and I never saw her or her son again.

“It was a very difficult season in my life, but at least I had Joyce to help me through it.”

Ray was quiet for a moment before reaching a hand out and taking hers. She set down her fork and looked up at him. To her surprise, there was no pity in his eyes, only empathy.

“I didn’t know whether or not she would come back for me, but she was very quick to leave that day and it was only a few days later that Joyce sat me down and said she didn’t think my stepmother would be coming back.

“I know it was hard for Joyce to have that conversation with me, but I’m glad she was frank about it. Otherwise, I might have spent months, or even years, hoping and dreaming that she would come for me,” she explained.

“So you had no one?” he asked, softly.

“Just Joyce and David. I still think about my stepbrother sometimes, wondering what happened to him. I’m sure he had a good life, but I wonder if she made him as selfish as she was or if he turned out to be a better man than that,” she said.

“I hope he’s a better man. And I hope you have a chance to find out one day. It’s not fair that she took you from someone who was a

brother to you,” Ray said.

“I do miss him. At least, I did. David filled in the role of a brother for me once I lived with Joyce. He’s her son and he’s a few years younger than me.

“David is a good young man and I’m sure he’ll make Joyce proud. More than anything, I’m glad he’ll be continuing his studies now instead of working,” she explained, trying to shift the conversation before she could get too emotional.

“That’s good, but I’m still upset about your stepmother. I can’t believe she would just abandon you that way,” Ray said.

And there it was. The word that crushed Cynthia more than any other.

Whenever anyone spoke of abandonment around her, she felt she would fall apart. Now, here was Ray, the man she hoped would never leave her, talking about her abandonment.

“I didn’t know you went through that,” he said. “It’s awful that you would have to suffer something so hard as a young girl, but I can see how strong it has made you.

“You ought to be proud for being so brave.”

It surprised Cynthia that he would be so kind and comforting. She hadn’t anticipated that he would know how to respond in a way that she found comforting and peaceful.

A part of her assumed it would only make Ray question whether she was worth staying with.

Cynthia had to fight back her tears. Now that she had been honest and told him about what was in her past, she found it was difficult to stop herself from sharing more of her hurts and what she still struggled to hide.

“Cynthia, I’m so sorry,” he said.

“It’s all right,” she said, sniffing and swiping at the tears in her eyes. “It was a long time ago and I’ve had to move on. There’s no reason to dwell on the past now.”

“That’s true, but it doesn’t mean the past doesn’t still hurt. You shouldn’t have to live with all that pain,” he said.

Cynthia couldn’t look at him for a moment. She hated being so vulnerable, knowing he was able to see everything in her heart through these tears and this pain.

It was too much, letting him know what she had suffered. She wished she had stayed quiet about it rather than explaining exactly what was going on.

But Ray stood and gave her hand just the gentlest tug to lead her from the table toward the door. She followed him to the great room where he sat on the sofa and she sat beside him.

Tenderly and sweetly, Ray brushed her hair back from her face. He stayed silent, but looked her directly in the eye, an expression of sincerity still on his face.

It was slow when he moved forward, his lips meeting hers in a sweet, careful kiss. There was no urgency or selfishness in it, just the hope of a new affection.

Cynthia’s heart leapt. She couldn’t believe this moment had actually arrived!

It meant Ray really did like her, that he found her attractive and interesting enough that he would kiss her and show affection.

When they slowly parted, she looked at him with dreamy eyes.

It was like a sigh of peace, a moment to behold this man she had

promised herself to. Here he was, holding her close and letting her know without a word that she mattered, that he cared for her.

“I hope you don’t mind that I did that,” he said, somewhat hesitantly.

“Not at all,” she replied with a hopeful smile. “I’m your wife and you’re allowed to kiss me whenever you want. I just hope it was to your satisfaction.”

“It was,” he said in a rush. “And you?”

“It was,” she echoed in confirmation.

After all the years of feeling unloved, Cynthia wondered if Ray was having genuine feelings for her. She certainly had begun to care for him, liking him more and more each time they were able to be together, no matter how rare that was.

“I know it’s been hard for you since coming here, trying to get used to how we do things, but you have been such a bright spot for us,” Ray said.

“Thank you,” she replied. “I wasn’t sure if I really made all that much of a difference so far.

“I’m trying to help out, but I’m so limited in my skills around the ranch. I often feel like I’m just trying to keep myself from failing.”

“You don’t have to feel that way. We work hard, but we also understand that you aren’t used to this life yet. It won’t be long before you get the hang of it all,” he said.

“You’re being really kind. If I can just figure out some of the basic things, I’ll be happy. Well, that and riding horses.

“I’ve been trying to learn. Your mother has been giving me direction and she said she would talk to you about my needing to learn,” she said.

“Of course,” Ray said, looking caught and embarrassed. “I know I was supposed to start helping you and I’ve let you down.

“Don’t worry, I’m going to try really hard to do better on that. It’s important to you and, because of that, it’s important to me, too.”

“Thank you, Ray. I believe if I can ride, I can help out more. I’ll be able to come out and get you when you’re way out in the fields beyond or if you need me to run into town for anything.

“It may seem like something small, but I see how often you ride and since your mother can’t, I just thought it might be a practical thing I can do,” she said.

“I’ll make time for it, Cynthia. Not only because you should learn, but because I want to spend that time with you. You’re right, you know. It’s the right thing to do.

“I should always give you more time in the day than I do and I feel bad for not making a stronger effort to spend time together. This will be a good opportunity,” he said.

Cynthia felt warmed by the fact that he was taking it seriously and when Ray put an arm around her and drew her close, she was comforted by him in a way she’d never imagined.

For the first time in her life, she felt as if she was exactly where she belonged. She felt as though she had a true family and a place to call home.

With all the worries and fears that had overwhelmed her, Cynthia was starting to believe she could push them aside. She could let go of her discomfort in being on her own in a new place.

She could let go of everything she had seen between Ray and Thomas. She could finally rest and be at peace.

Now, nearly three weeks into her marriage, she could allow herself to

consider that this might actually be a true, happy marriage.

“You are the most remarkable thing that has ever happened to me, you know,” Ray whispered as she leaned into him.

“Really?” she asked in astonishment.

“Really. I am so thankful that you’re here. And I’m thankful that we have a whole life ahead of us,” Ray replied.

In that moment, Cynthia was thankful, as well. She hoped with all her heart that there would be even better things to come.

“Sit with me, Ray.”

Ray’s mother was in the great room, mending a few of his shirts as she so often had to do. He wasn’t sure what she wanted to talk to him about, but he could tell that it was serious.

“What is it, Ma? Did something happen?” he asked, worried that more rumors had spread about him thanks to Thomas.

But his mother was usually at home and there was no chance of her hearing things about him from here. Had she had any visitors of late?

“It’s about Cynthia. I would like to talk to you about her,” she said.

“Oh, of course. What is it? I hope you’re not going to say you don’t like her,” he said, suddenly worried.

“That’s not it at all. In fact, I really do like her and I’m hoping that you do, as well,” she replied.

“I do, Ma. I like her very much. She’s a wonderful woman. Honestly, I never thought I’d find someone like her, especially not through something like the paper.

“It’s still baffling to me that I managed to get such a grand wife in that way,” he said.

A part of him was still embarrassed that he’d even needed to find a

wife through the papers instead of meeting her in person. Although it had worked out nicely for him, he had already heard the way Thomas mocked him for having to find her like this.

“I’m glad it has been a good match, Ray, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have concerns,” his mother said.

Ray’s stomach turned with anxiety and he wondered what was bothering her. Surely, she didn’t think anything bad about Cynthia.

“She’s already working so hard and she’s not used to it. I know she was probably a hard worker before coming here, but it was a very different life she lived.

“This isn’t something people can just ease into, you know. This kind of work is difficult and it requires a lot of effort. You need to warn Cynthia against working this hard already,” she said.

Ray winced and looked away, thinking about what she was saying.

He hadn’t noticed that she was putting in too much effort. Sure, it was obvious Cynthia was working hard, but was she really doing as much as his mother said she was?

“You need to tell her to slow down, to take her time. She wants to do everything immediately and perfectly because that is what she has seen you do.

“It’s clear she wants everything to be the way you would have it, but it can’t be like that so soon. She has to take time to learn. She won’t do that unless you tell her to,” she said.

“But she’s getting it well, Ma. She’s learning. Cynthia has managed to pick up nearly everything she’s tried,” he said in her defense.

Although he didn’t want her to exhaust herself, he also wanted to make sure his mother gave her credit.

“That’s not what I’m saying, Ray. Of course she is doing well and picking things up.

“She has made tremendous strides and effort, but that’s different from forcing herself to do things that she is unaccustomed to doing.

“I don’t want Cynthia hurting herself in an effort to be perfect and, right now, that’s what I’m afraid is going to happen. That’s why I need you to urge her to slow down,” she said.

Ray considered it for a moment. Cynthia had certainly been accomplishing tasks on every front. Was it possible that his mother was right? Was Cynthia doing too much, too soon?

Was she trying so hard to prove herself that she had pushed herself into a difficult position and actually worsened her circumstances?

“How can I encourage her and support her efforts if I’m also supposed to tell her to slow down?” he asked.

“You need to be appreciative. Tell her how wonderfully she’s doing, but also tell her not to exhaust herself. She shouldn’t be working so hard that she can barely function.

“She also needs to take time with each task to learn how to do it properly, as opposed to being thrown into every little thing and expected to understand it all,” she said.

“What tasks, Ma? Which ones has she been thrown into too quickly?”

“All of them,” she scoffed. “Have you seen how frantically she tries to accomplish everything? It’s unfair, Ray. She doesn’t deserve this.”

He tried to think back to everything he had witnessed from Cynthia. Was his mother right? Had he missed it? Was Cynthia struggling and he hadn’t even noticed?

“I’m sorry, Ma. I honestly didn’t realize she was having such a difficult

time,” he said.

“I know, and that’s why I’m telling you,” she replied in a stern voice.

“You need to be more aware of this. She’s just an innocent woman trying to learn how to do things around a ranch and it’s not easy.”

“But what?” he asked in exasperation. “What has happened that made you see this? What has been so difficult for her?”

“Ray Crocker,” his mother said, shaking her head, “you really haven’t been paying attention. If you need examples, I have plenty for you. For starters, let’s discuss her main responsibility.”

“The garden?” he asked.

“Exactly. The garden. This is a woman who has never had a real garden before. She said the woman she lived with grew a few herbs, but Cynthia never had anything to do with it.

“That means gardening is entirely new to her and it has become her biggest responsibility,” she said.

“But she’s doing fine,” Ray replied.

“I told you in confidence about what happened,” his mother said.

“And I tried not to embarrass her about it. She mentioned it, that she thought seedlings were weeds, but I never accused her of anything,” he said.

“I’m glad, but Ray, this is about her confidence and her abilities, just as it’s also about our food. I know you want her working the garden so I don’t have to bend over so much, but think about it.

“If I’m not out there, helping her and showing her what to do, what’s going to happen to the garden? What happens when she makes a mistake with the crops?

“Not only do we not eat, but she ends up humiliated because we forced her into something she doesn’t know how to do,” his mother said.

Ray had never thought about it that way. He always imagined gardening would just come naturally to other people like it did to him and to his mother.

Why didn’t city folk understand the simplicity of growing things? How could they confuse seedlings with weeds?

He didn’t like thinking about it, but his mother was right. Cynthia had put forth so much effort already and he had taken her for granted.

Even though she was trying very hard to prove herself, Ray had simply thought she was doing what anyone else might do.

He hadn’t seen it as anything particularly special, though he probably ought to have done so.

“You see why I’m bothered?” his mother asked.

“I do, Ma. I didn’t before, but I do now,” he said.

“Good. I’m glad. Because that girl needs your support. She needs your encouragement, but she also needs you to tell her that she’s done enough and it’s time for her to rest,” she said.

Ray chewed the inside of his lip. He wished he’d paid more attention earlier on.

His mother was right about it not being fair to Cynthia that they had put all this pressure on her to do things she’d never done before.

The last thing he wanted was to make her feel as if she wasn’t capable.

He felt awful for not having noticed any of it, but it was time he did a

better job of watching out for her and ensuring she was getting the rest she needed.

Just because he was terrible at resting didn't mean Cynthia needed to be. It wasn't fair for her to struggle like this.

"What about riding?" he asked. "Do you think it's too soon for her to learn? Maybe I should let her take some time with the other things first before adding that to her list of tasks."

"No, actually, I think riding is very important," his mother said.

Ray was surprised by this. He felt it contradicted everything she'd just said to him. "How so?"

"Riding is something she really wants to learn, and if she is going to have all these responsibilities and things she must do, it's good for her to have a challenge that she wants to tackle.

"You need to make sure she gets the chance to learn to ride," his mother said.

"What if she doesn't like it? What if it only becomes another area of stress for her?" he asked.

"Then it's up to Cynthia to tell you that and for her to take a step back and pause her learning. She needs to make up her mind on the things she wants to do, since she doesn't have a choice but to help with the other tasks that she's expected to take on," she said.

"She's participating in so many things on the ranch already, what makes you think she isn't just as excited about them?" he asked.

"Have you paid no attention to your wife at all, Ray? I'm surprised at you and I'm also disappointed. You should know better than this.

"Your wife is very clearly not enjoying many of the things set before her and it's up to you to ensure that she is settling in," she scolded.

Ray paused, letting those words sink in. He was deeply ashamed. If his mother was right and he really had failed so much already, what was he supposed to do now?

How could he make things right for Cynthia and make her happy? He didn't know what to say or how to make up for it.

In fact, all it did was bring to mind everything Thomas had said and accused him of already. Maybe Thomas was right. Maybe he was a failure and he didn't know how to keep his wife happy.

And if he wasn't making an effort to work hard for her and make her content, what good was he? It was shameful to be the sort of husband who couldn't take care of his wife.

"I'm sorry I didn't notice, Ma," he said.

"You should be. Nevertheless, it's not too late to make things right. You just need to focus on what's best for her. I want to see you trying. Truly trying.

"I want to see you making an effort to support Cynthia even when it's not convenient for you," she said.

"How do I do that? I need help, Ma. I've never had a wife before and I don't know what a woman needs from her husband.

"If you were in Cynthia's position, what would you want from your husband?" he asked.

"I would want his time and attention. I would want him to sit with me and ask me plainly how he can help. I would want him to show empathy when I express that I'm confused," she said.

"But Cynthia hasn't said she's confused," he said.

"Because you haven't sat with her long enough to ask," she replied.

Although he had done a little bit better, his mother was right. He'd had such a lovely time with Cynthia the evening before when they'd sat together and he'd kissed her for the first time, but that wasn't the same as truly supporting her through the challenges she was facing on the ranch.

If he was going to make her life easier, he would need to do more than that.

What he couldn't do was give in to the accusations Thomas had made against him. He wouldn't become a lousy husband. And if he was already failing, he would make it right.

But Ray thought about his own father. He'd never once seen his father act this way or fail his mother like this. Was Cynthia going to be so disappointed by him that she would leave?

Would he end up alone all over again because he couldn't keep her there?

These worries flooded Ray until he didn't know what more he could possibly do. He thought about what it would mean to push beyond his own concerns and actually listen to Cynthia's, but even then, he wasn't sure he was doing the right thing.

Ray imagined that if he tried to listen to her, she might just tell him that everything was all right and then where would he be?

Cynthia had shown no concerns for her tasks. She hadn't complained or told him she was struggling. Was it because she was afraid of not working as hard as he did?

That seemed to be what his mother thought. If so, he realized it was more important than ever to be sensitive to her needs.

"All right, Ma," he said. "I understand and I'm going to spend more time focusing on her and ensuring that she isn't stuck without proper assistance.

“I don’t want Cynthia to suffer and I’m sorry I didn’t see it before. I promise you, she’ll have support from me from now on. Thank you for letting me know I wasn’t doing the right thing.”

“I just want you to spend more time focusing on what’s going on in front of you. She needs your attention and if you’re willing to give it to her, I’m sure everything is going to be just fine between the two of you,” she said.

“Thank you, Ma,” he said again.

“You’re very welcome. Now, go on. You’ve got work to do,” she said, teasingly.

Ray left her, but their conversation continued to echo in his mind. She was right and he knew there was a bigger threat at hand.

What did this mean for the future? Was he going to cause Cynthia grief? Was she going to grow disappointed and even bitter against him?

And what would happen the next time there was a problem at hand? What if Ray’s mother didn’t point it out and he actually had to face the consequences of his own neglect?

Although Cynthia was still trying to learn how to ride a horse, she'd picked up a skill with the buckboard rather quickly. It was easy to direct the horses with this piece of equipment and she was excited when she was able to make her first trip into town on her own.

Anita had sent her and, when Cynthia had asked if Ray was all right with it, Anita had told her not to worry.

Of course, Cynthia knew, that could mean one of two things. Either Ray was fine with it, or Ray didn't know about it.

Whichever option it was, she figured it was best to just go into town like Anita asked and the rest would be dealt with later on.

She went first to the general store to pick up flour and sugar. Inside, she was delighted by everything she saw, from little doilies and trinkets to spices and herbs.

But in the end, she'd been instructed to get only what was needed for the sake of baking bread and most everything else they needed, they had at the ranch.

"Thank you very much," Cynthia said, smiling at the man behind the counter. She felt people staring at her, as if they all knew she was the wife Ray had brought into town from the city.

She wondered if she ought to be uncomfortable with that.

There was no reason for anyone to be wary of her just because she was new in town, was there? Why would they be so cautious around her?

Either way, she was glad to be out and about and appreciated the chance to have some time in town. It was a beautiful day and that only gave her more energy and happiness to be outside, enjoying that beauty.

When she finished loading the things onto the back of the buckboard, Cynthia heard footsteps behind her.

She was already growing accustomed to the sound of that gait and when she turned and saw Thomas, Cynthia stiffened and crossed her arms, defensive even before he had a chance to speak.

“Cynthia, how nice to see you again. It appears you come to town every time I do these days,” he said with a laugh.

She found it quite a coincidence as well, but knew Thomas could see the main road from his property. Was it possible that any time he saw her on the way into town, whether on her own or with Ray, he was following her?

She couldn’t imagine him doing something so brash, but why else were they always in town on the same day?

“So it does,” she replied, coldly.

“And how are you?” he asked, taking another step forward, leading Cynthia to take another step back.

“I am doing very well,” she replied. “Perfectly happy.”

“That’s nice to hear. I’m glad you’re happy. I expect you have been busy around the ranch. I do hope Ray is treating you well?” he asked.

“Of course he is. Why wouldn’t he be?” she scoffed, not making eye

contact.

“Ah, I see,” Thomas replied, sadly. “You look tired. Is he pushing you too hard?”

“Is he expecting you to do everything in the same way he does? I know he’s a hard worker, but you must get some rest now and then.”

There was something strange and formal about the way Thomas spoke. He sounded more like a man from the city, but he certainly had a rural appearance.

Cynthia wondered if he had spent part of his life in the city, or if his mother and father had. It was the only way to explain his familiar speech and demeanor, so different from everything else out in Montana.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Hmm?”

“You’re looking at me as if you recognize something,” he said.

“Oh, no, nothing like that,” she said, looking away once more. Cynthia hadn’t realized that she had been studying him and now she was worried he might interpret it as interest.

“It’s all right, you know. You can tell me what you were thinking,” he said.

Realizing that she could either tell him the truth or risk having him think she was interested, Cynthia decided to say what was on her mind.

“I was thinking you talk like you’re from the city,” she said.

Thomas laughed and gave a nonchalant shrug. “My father was a rancher, but he passed away.

“At that point, his brother, who had been living in the city for nearly twenty years, came to the ranch to raise me,” he said.

“I’m accustomed to this life, but the man who brought me up wasn’t. Does that answer your question?”

All it did was make her realize that they had something in common after all, having lost their parents and being raised by another.

But once more, Cynthia feared that he would use this as an excuse to try and bond.

She didn’t want that. She only wanted to be left alone.

“I suppose. Now, I must be on my way,” she said, climbing onto the buckboard.

“Already? I had hoped I might get to speak with you. I’m worried about you, you know. What with Ray and his temper and everything, I feared he might not be treating you very well,” he said.

“And I have told you that he is. If you will excuse me, I need to leave. I would appreciate it if you would be so kind as to leave me alone.

“I am not comfortable with your company and I prefer to only interact with my husband and to also speak with our ranch hand when the matter is appropriate,” she said, putting herself into a comfortable box in which she didn’t need to interact with any man she didn’t yet know or trust.

“I can’t leave you alone, Cynthia,” he replied, boldly.

She darted her eyes at him in anger. How could he behave this way? Why was he being so shameless?

“I beg your pardon? It is not up to you. I have told you what I want and I expect you to understand and respect my wishes. That is enough,” she said.

“But it isn’t. I can’t leave you alone because my heart breaks when I see a woman so neglected,” he said.

“Neglected?” she scoffed, not willing to consider it for even a moment.

“Yes, neglected,” he replied. “When a man is so devoted to his work that his wife is abandoned? Of course, it grieves me.”

There it was again, that awful word. Cynthia tried not to show her hurt when he said it, but she feared it was too late.

It was impossible to hide the depths of pain she felt when it came to her abandonment and how much it grieved her to think she was in that position once more.

What was Thomas seeing that she had missed? Her heart began to ache. Had Ray really begun to abandon her already? Was that why he was always so busy and never had time for her?

He hadn’t even followed through on showing her how to ride a horse just yet. She’d been practicing on her own and, one day, he gave her a few tips while he was working on other projects and simply observed her, but for the most part, she was still on her own even in this task.

Maybe Thomas was right. Maybe Ray really was abandoning her.

But she couldn’t let him know that. It was wrong to give in to Thomas’s ridiculous insistence.

“I’m sorry, but I’m afraid you are confused. Ray has been nothing but a wonderful husband and he is very attentive,” she said.

“Is that so? It seems you’re working awfully hard and I know he does the same.

“It is rather astonishing to know that you have time to have a marriage when there are so many projects being done all the time,” he said.

“Yes, well, we’re just working hard to make the ranch a success. I want to see my husband succeed, of course.

“I am delighted to learn how to do these things and Ray takes excellent care of me in the meantime. He ensures I am provided for, that I get everything I need.

“He even ensures I have rest when I need it, although I prefer to continue learning my tasks,” she said, stoically.

“My goodness, I had no idea a woman such as you exists. Not only are you astoundingly skilled in learning new things, but you’re also fiercely loyal to your husband.

“I hope he gives you the same loyalty. It would be devastating to come in second to the ranch instead of having his full attention and being given priority,” Thomas said.

The manipulation was blatant, but that didn’t make Cynthia immune. Even though she believed Thomas to be a snake, she still found herself caught in his trap.

She questioned herself and Ray even as she refuted everything Thomas said. It was incredibly frustrating.

“You seem to have very strong opinions, but I fear they are unfounded,” she said. “Now, if you will forgive me, I do need to get back to the ranch.”

“Yes, of course. You must forgive me for keeping you away. I’m sure it’s difficult for you to be gone for too long and I shouldn’t have kept you.

“And I don’t want Ray to be bothered by our conversations. He seems not to like it when we talk. I worry that he won’t trust you either if we continue bumping into one another in town,” he said.

Cynthia said nothing more to him. Thomas was obviously trying to get

her to wonder if Ray trusted her. Was it possible Ray thought her a liar or some other awful thing?

She knew better than to allow Thomas to get into her mind like this, but how could she avoid it? How could she prevent him from pushing her thoughts into such gray areas?

As she took the buckboard back to the ranch, Cynthia started to wonder about the other people in town and what they thought.

When they saw Cynthia, did they think that she was a good wife to a good husband?

Or did they see what Thomas saw? Did they think that Ray wasn't really interested in her, that he didn't care about her?

It was embarrassing to wonder and Cynthia found that she wasn't sure what to do. She didn't even know if she trusted Ray anymore.

"Oh, Cynthia, you fool," she whispered to herself. She knew better than this.

Of course Thomas was just trying to manipulate her. There was no reason to believe anything different.

And yet, his words were so convincing.

It was impossible for him to know what fears came to her naturally and yet he seemed to. He could only have observed Ray's lack of affection for her and he decided to warn her about it.

Was it possible that anything different had taken place? Or was it true?

Was she just a fool who would always be abandoned?

Ray was excited to finally take Cynthia out for a nice day together. He had been meaning to do this for a while, but it was difficult with all the other things that needed to be done on the ranch and, against his better judgment, his wife had simply fallen down the list of priorities.

He got his shoes on and waited until Cynthia came to meet him at the door. Her smile was bright and lovely as always.

“Excellent. Are you ready?” he asked.

“I certainly am,” she replied, eagerly.

“Perfect. Come with me,” Ray said.

He offered his hand and Cynthia took it. He loved holding her hand. Whenever he had the chance to do so, it made him feel a sense of wonder.

Sure, he knew he was married, but there was a difference between being married and having a wife. The state of being married was just that. It was a static situation. But having a wife?

That was a strange and marvelous realization whenever he got to interact with her and hear her voice. It was lovely and wonderful and still shocking at times to think about.

They had been married for over three weeks now and he still felt he

didn't know her enough, but Ray hoped that would change starting that day.

"All right, so my Ma already introduced you to Lulu, right?" he asked.

"She sure did. And I've ridden Lulu for at least a few minutes every day for the past week," she said.

"Right. Sorry again about that. I know I was supposed to be teaching you how to ride and I don't want you to think I intentionally neglected it. I was just very busy," he said.

"I understand. But I'm glad we're doing this now. I was worried it might never happen," she confessed.

Ray felt awful hearing that. He didn't want to be the sort of husband who couldn't keep his commitments. He had to be sure he was making every effort to look after his wife.

After the warnings his mother had given him, he had started to try and pay attention even when he couldn't fix things. He noticed how distracted and overwhelmed Cynthia seemed at times.

Not only that, but he didn't want Thomas's words and threats to come to pass. It was best if he made a solid effort to really care for Cynthia and show her how much she meant to him before she started thinking she wasn't important.

"Here you go," he said, helping her mount Lulu, whom he'd saddled just a bit before lunch to have her ready for this.

"Perfect," Cynthia said with a happy sigh.

"You're comfortable?" he asked, hoping she wouldn't be frightened.

"Absolutely. This is just where I want to be," she said.

"Good, good," he said, securing the picnic sack to his own horse's

saddle. Ray was excited to take Cynthia down to the lake and once he was on his horse, they started in that direction.

“It’s a perfect day for this,” Cynthia said. “The sun is out and it’s gorgeous. I’m glad to be here today of all days.”

“You’re right. It really is nice. I’m glad for it, as well.

“You know, if you ever want to come out on your own, you’re welcome to, but you might just need to pester me a bit more so I don’t fail to ride with you. I said I would try to do it every day and it’s taken me near enough a week just to get you out once,” Ray confessed.

“I know you’re busy. It would mean a lot to me if you’re able to ride with me sometimes, but I understand that I have to be gracious with you about all that you do,” she said.

Ray was struck by her words and her kindness. It was wonderful that she was so gentle with him and that Cynthia actually wanted to show mercy.

She was a kind woman, a patient one, too. He didn’t want to take that for granted or go overboard on things that he didn’t deserve. If she was going to be this gracious, he would need to make a point to be loyal and make her a higher priority.

“You’re a natural on the horse, you know,” he said, observing how easily she rode.

“You think so?” Cynthia asked, clearly delighted by his comment.

“Absolutely. It seems like you have been riding for years, and Lulu clearly likes you,” he said.

“Well, your mother told me Lulu is just an easy horse. Maybe it’s not me, but it’s just her demeanor,” she said.

“Still, Lulu wouldn’t be comfortable if you weren’t. She likes you because you’re just going along at an easy pace, making sure you keep your wits about you.

“And you have a perfect tension on the reins. I’m impressed by that for sure. You have instinct,” he said.

Cynthia smiled to herself and didn’t say anything. She was obviously pleased.

At last, they reached the lake and dismounted. Ray laid out the blanket for them to sit on and then pulled bread and cheese out of the sack.

“I can’t tell you how excited I am for harvest,” he said, laughing.

“Harvest? Isn’t that a ways away?” Cynthia asked.

“Well, we have regular harvests, but the summer harvest sure is a while away. I don’t like peas or radishes on a sandwich so these spring harvests aren’t my favorite, but when the tomatoes are ripe?

“That’s when these sandwiches start tasting perfect,” he said.

“It will come before you know it, I’m sure,” Cynthia said.

He looked at her with eagerness, glad she was thinking ahead, as well. He hoped she wouldn’t decide to leave him, decide that all of this was just too much.

He needed Cynthia to stay and be with him.

“I know you’re working hard to make sure things grow, and I’m sorry if I haven’t told you how much I appreciate it. I’m sure it’s all new for you, but you’ve done very well,” he said.

Cynthia blushed and Ray slid a little bit closer to where she was sitting. He handed her some bread and Cynthia placed a slice of

cheese between two chunks.

It was hardly a fantastic meal, but she didn't complain and Ray was glad for how easily she went along with simple things.

"I also want to apologize for how hard I work," he said, knowing it was time to address the issue.

"Apologize? But isn't working hard a good thing?" Cynthia asked.

Her tone was evident. She was trying to see if he was really sorry or if he was only repeating what everyone else said. Ray knew he did too much and it was a problem.

His apology, although late, was genuine.

"Cynthia, I work hard because I feel I have a lot to prove, but I know it's not a good thing all the time. I don't want to always be the kind of man who is working to the point that I have neglected the people who matter the most in my life.

"It's not right for me to work so much that the ranch is a bigger priority than my wife is and, for that, I really am sorry. You don't deserve to come in second to a piece of property," he said.

"You really mean that?" she asked, hopeful.

"I do. And because I set that example, I know I've made you work hard, too, probably harder than necessary. You're still new here and need to adjust.

"It's not fair that you've been forced into this position and I'm sorry for that. I want to do better on my part so that I can help you more.

"I don't want you making yourself ill because you're trying to keep up with me," he said, thinking back to the two weeks he spent in bed when he'd first come across her advertisement in the paper.

"I won't become ill, but I do need to learn how to do these things. Maybe it's a good thing that I've had to work hard and get used to it all quickly," she said.

"No, it's not good. It's not good at all. You need a chance to ease into new things like this.

"I don't want you being forced into a position where you're exhausted all the time, and that's what I've done to you," he acknowledged.

"So, what do you suggest?" Cynthia asked him.

This was a good question. Ray hadn't thought through anything more than trying to pay better attention to Cynthia and give her more time to rest.

What about himself? Was he going to accept more rest, or was he going to continue throwing himself into things so that he could best Thomas and be as good as his own father was?

He had a lot of decisions to make in that respect and it was hard knowing the best thing to do. What Ray did not want was to hurt his wife or his mother.

He couldn't bear to think that Cynthia would end up breaking her back from the effort. His mother was always in pain and if he forced Cynthia to do this work now, would she reach that stage even sooner than his mother had?

"I don't know," he answered Cynthia. "I just know we can't go on like this forever.

"I hope to hire another ranch hand eventually, but it's not easy to do. It costs a lot of money to have someone else around."

"Won't it also help you make money? You'll have another person to handle work more efficiently," she said.

Ray grinned, appreciating her business mindset.

“You’re a brilliant woman,” he said, taking her hand in his.

She smiled sweetly with that shy expression that he found delightfully kissable. But Ray only took her hand and kissed the back of it once before offering her a canteen in case she was thirsty.

“Thank you,” she said, taking it from him.

Ray took a bite of his cheese sandwich, still dreaming of the tomatoes that he hoped would grow in the short window they had for the season. He wanted to build a decent structure to grow things in when it started to get cold, but they weren’t set up for it yet.

In the meantime, he hoped there would be no more mishaps in the garden for Cynthia.

“So, have I managed to take off a little bit of the pressure you were under?” he asked her, hopeful that she would be able to rest now.

“You have. I’m still eager to learn things and to prove myself, but you have certainly helped me see that I don’t have to do everything and I don’t have to do it all right away,” she said.

She appeared genuinely surprised by this news, but also quite happy. That was a relief for him, as well.

But the biggest thing on Ray’s mind wasn’t about all the work to be done and the work to set aside. It wasn’t about Thomas and the rivalry and how well the ranch was doing.

It wasn’t about tomatoes and sandwiches or riding horses and enjoying the calm, peaceful waters of the lake on a sunny, cloudless day.

All he could think about was the way his heart seemed to leap in his chest when he looked at Cynthia and how much he wanted to kiss her

again, but was too anxious about kissing her too often.

He thought about the feeling he got whenever she walked in a room, how his skin would prickle with excitement and he felt his smile before he felt anything else.

Was this love? He had never felt love before and it was difficult to know for sure when it was something so foreign. And yet, it had to be. What else could it be?

Surely, this was what it felt like to be in love with someone and know she was going to spend her life with him.

Ray wondered if Cynthia felt the same. Was she falling in love with him? Did she trust him enough to fall in love? Or was he hoping for too much?

It was possible that she would take a whole lot longer to fall in love and he was all right with that. He could be patient if he had to be, even if it was difficult. And love was certainly patient.

It only made him that much more certain that what he felt now was something felt by the poets and philosophers through the ages.

“Are you all right?” Cynthia asked him, her eyes bright and a gleam in her smile.

“Of course. Why do you ask?”

“You’re staring at me, but you look almost as if you’re in a daze,” she said.

“I suppose I am,” Ray replied.

She laughed and looked at him curiously, waiting for an explanation.

“Maybe there’s something about you,” he said.

“Something about me?” she asked, her confusion shifting to concern.

Ray put his palm to her cheek and gazed into her eyes with affection.

“Yes, Cynthia,” he said. “Maybe there’s something about you that puts me in a daze. When I look at you, that’s when everything seems all right in the world.”

Cynthia had just finished cleaning the kitchen and needed to get started on dusting the great room.

She had finished all her other chores that morning, from milking the cow to gathering eggs and, finally, taking a walk around the garden to pick off the squash bugs that seemed to be attacking.

But now she was getting started on her other tasks and it was a surprise when she heard the sound of someone approaching from outside. Someone was riding their horse toward the house, and Cynthia looked out the window to see none other than Thomas approaching.

He smiled at her through the window and her skin prickled with worry.

She turned, ready to call out to Anita or Ray, or even Mark, but remembered that she was on her own. Anita was visiting a friend in town, while Ray and Mark were mending a part of the fence over a mile away on the other side of the property.

They had warned it would be a job that was likely to take them the whole day.

Cynthia was alone.

She took a deep breath, closing her eyes and shaking her head that she would have to deal with this. He knew she was home, so she couldn't

reasonably avoid answering the door when he knocked.

Instead of giving in to her worry, Cynthia calmly walked over and opened it.

“Ray isn’t home,” she said without emotion, not bothering to greet him or pretend she wanted to interact with him at all.

Cynthia hoped her deadpan expression would be enough to send Thomas away.

Rather than looking offended, her demeanor only seemed to amuse him. A sly smile crossed his face and he took another step forward.

“I didn’t come here for Ray,” he said.

“Then you have wasted your time,” Cynthia replied.

“You are rather amusing, you know that? I appreciate your loyalty to Ray, but I also enjoy the way you so flatly refuse any advances I make.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter. If Ray isn’t around, that only makes my job that much easier,” he said.

Cynthia knew it would be a mistake to ask him what he meant, but she was trapped. Trying to find a balance between ensuring he didn’t cross any lines while also not treating him with overt rudeness was difficult.

She wondered how she could ever get Thomas to leave her alone if he kept coming to her like this, making these little comments and acting as though he were entitled to her attention.

It bothered her more than she liked, and Cynthia was starting to think she would need help if she was going to get Thomas to leave her alone once and for all.

“What is it that you want? If you’re not here for Ray, you must have

had a purpose in showing up here,” she said in a bitter tone.

“I did,” he replied. “But I think you know my answer, and I don’t think you would have asked if you didn’t want to hear me say it.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she replied, sternly.

“It’s you, Cynthia. I came here because you’re what I want. I want you to come with me so we can live our lives together,” he said, a heroic determination in his eyes.

Cynthia was appalled. How could he say any of this? Did he really expect her to go with him?

Did he think she would actually abandon Ray just to follow some arrogant fool who was more interested in his pride and ego than in being a decent person?

“How can you come here and make that kind of request of me? I am a married woman. Surely, you know that by now,” she insisted.

He took a step back and placed a hand on his chest, eyes suddenly wide with innocence.

“I never meant to offend you. I’m not here to simply take you away from Ray and treat you like some sort of conquest. I came because I am concerned about you.

“Don’t you understand, Cynthia? I want to make sure that you live a good life—I’m worried that you’re missing out on the life you deserve,” he said.

“My life is wonderful here. I don’t need you or your nonsensical offers. I am happy here. You keep getting in the way, chasing after me as though you deserve anything from me.

“I can’t understand what has led you to think you have any rights to my heart,” Cynthia said, hoping he would understand once and for all

that she found him thoroughly disagreeable.

“But I could give you so much more than Ray ever will. I could give you a nicer home, more land. You would have every finery you can imagine.

“As many pairs of shoes as you’d like, and also dresses and ribbons, a maid in the home so you don’t have to do all the cooking and cleaning. You could have all of it,” he said.

“I don’t want any of that!” Cynthia snapped. She started to shut the door in his face, but Thomas spoke first.

“You would have love.”

Those four words were a knife in Cynthia’s heart. Why did he have to make that kind of an offer?

She wished he hadn’t said that. It only made it that much more difficult, pushing her to the point that she actually heard him.

Up until that moment, Thomas was just the terrible, arrogant man he had been since she met him. But with that single offer, he had offered Cynthia the one thing she wanted more than any other.

She knew he was just being manipulative, that he would never love her. She also knew that she was already falling in love with Ray and she would never abandon him.

And yet, despite knowing that Thomas’s words meant nothing, she had made that brief mistake of pausing and Thomas seemed to think he had gotten through to her with his words.

“You see?” he asked.

“See what?” she asked, turning on him in anger.

“You see that you want love? It means you don’t already have it. It

means you don't feel the affection that a woman needs from her husband. And how could you?" he asked.

"Of course I do," she replied.

"It's not your fault, Cynthia. It's Ray's. Like I told you before, he tends to abandon the people in his life. All he cares about is his work," he said.

Cynthia winced, knowing that he had, again, found her weak point. She hated how much Ray worked and how much fear she had for their future.

Still, she couldn't believe Thomas would home in on these insecurities and suggest that she should be with him instead because of them. It really was a wicked scheme for him to try.

She wondered if he had any shame at all or if Thomas was simply so determined to ruin Ray's life that he didn't even consider how cruelly he was acting.

And yet, despite Cynthia being shocked and disgusted, he had succeeded. She was terrified.

Could she really risk being abandoned by someone else? Could she risk losing Ray because of his love for the ranch and ambivalence toward her?

She and Ray certainly had a nice time whenever they were together, but she didn't want to come in second. She didn't want to be less important than the ranch was. It wasn't fair.

And Thomas was so good at his manipulation that, even though Cynthia knew what he was trying to do, she couldn't completely fight against it.

"I've had enough of this, Thomas," she said, choosing to be strong and get rid of him before he could distract her further from what she knew

was right.

“Enough of what? Don’t you want to be cared for?”

“If I were you, I would say that I’d had enough of my spouse pushing me aside and choosing the beasts on his ranch before he chose me,” Thomas said.

“And what makes you so certain that you know how he treats me? Honestly, you aren’t here day in and day out.

“You have no idea what kind of husband he is,” Cynthia said, emboldened by her frustration.

“I may not know what kind of husband he is, but I do know what kind of man he is and that has to impact how he treats you. Ray is the kind of man who puts his whole self into his work, regardless of what it means for those around him.

“I don’t for a moment believe that he treats you the way he’s supposed to. You can claim otherwise, but until I see it, I won’t expect any different from him,” he said.

Cynthia fumed, wishing she hadn’t given him the chance to say all these things. She was only making matters worse by trying to make them better.

At last, without warning and without another word, she did what she ought to have done from the first moment he opened his mouth.

She shut the door and locked it.

“Cynthia! Cynthia, I will always be here for you!” he called from the other side of the door as she walked away. “I won’t ever abandon you, no matter what!”

Cynthia covered her ears and squeezed her eyes shut as she rushed back to the kitchen. She could still hear him calling after her, but his

voice was muffled and she couldn't make out the words anymore.

She knelt low, huddled in front of the wash basin so he wouldn't see her through the windows. At last, he grew quiet and Cynthia took a deep breath and uncovered her ears.

The silence was a welcome relief and she took a deep breath, thankful that it was all over.

Standing and peering out the window to ensure he was gone, Cynthia saw Thomas riding away slowly. He was far enough that she had no concern about him turning back.

It seemed as though everything was coming apart even before it was put together.

She had only been here a short time and, already, someone was getting in the way. Already, there was a risk that she might be abandoned by her husband.

Cynthia didn't know what more she could do at this point. It was too much, trying to prove that she could make everyone happy. Ray was so distracted by everything else he had and wanted.

Thomas was determined to get between them. Anita was the only one she felt she could talk to, but since Anita was Ray's mother, it was complicated.

Above it all, after seeing Ray's reactions to Thomas before this, she was no longer sure if she ought to tell him. Maybe this was something she had to handle on her own.

Cynthia was starting to think that Ray might get himself into trouble or even get hurt if he learned that Thomas had, once again, approached her.

He didn't seem to understand how to handle conflict peacefully. Because of that, she feared he might respond this time even worse

than he had previously.

Although she was shaken, Cynthia got back to work, making every effort to get things done. She dusted and swept, straightened up whatever was out of place.

In all, she focused her attention on work instead of her emotions, knowing she would be in trouble if she risked thinking too much about what Thomas had said.

She might find herself believing his arrogant and foolish accusations against Ray, and then she would be so insecure that she would react to those strong emotions.

It was confusing, but she had been through enough in the past to understand when someone was trying to manipulate her, and she had to hold onto that awareness. The risk of letting go and thinking that she could listen to her worries would only lead her down a dark path.

At last, Anita returned home and Cynthia tried to hide her anxiety. All she wanted to do was spill out her worries and discuss what had taken place.

But once more, she recalled Ray's anger the previous times Thomas had approached her. In many ways, she felt her silence would protect him from doing something he might regret.

"The house looks very clean. You must have been working hard this morning," Anita said.

"I'm trying," she replied with a nervous laugh.

"Is everything all right?"

Anita looked worried and she rested a hand on Cynthia's arm. It was a comfort Cynthia felt she didn't deserve. But she couldn't bring herself to tell Anita the truth. Not yet, anyway.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I had my coffee but didn’t eat much at breakfast. I think it made me a bit jittery.”

Anita’s brow twitched, as though she didn’t quite believe Cynthia. But she relented, pulling back her hand and replacing her suspicion with a smile.

“Well, in that case, I think you had better eat something. It’s well past lunchtime, Cynthia. Let’s get you a bite,” Anita said.

Cynthia followed Anita to the kitchen, telling herself that everything would be fine. Although she didn’t think it was true, it was the only thing she could cling to.

If she let go of that hope for even a moment, Cynthia was sure everything would soon unravel.

Ray smiled when he woke in the morning and looked at the beautiful woman beside him. His heart swelled, reminded that he had such a lovely wife.

She wasn't what he had expected, but in truth, he hadn't known what to expect anyway.

Cynthia didn't stir. As silently as he could, he got out of bed, trying not to make any movements that would wake her. Relieved that he had succeeded, Ray dressed for the day.

The sun was still half an hour away, just a whisper of gray on the horizon. It made him smile, knowing he could get up this early and get some things done without disturbing the others.

He had been trying to adjust his priorities, but it was difficult. While he enjoyed being around Cynthia, it was important for him to finish his other tasks, as well.

Ray headed out into the field, scanning for the cattle when he saw something startling.

"No, no, no, no, no!" he shouted, running full speed ahead.

The fence was completely torn apart with a gap of easily twenty feet. It looked to be some kind of a stampede, as though a dozen or so cattle had burst through it.

Ray gasped and fell to his knees, shocked and dismayed at what he saw before him.

How could this have happened? What was he supposed to do now? How could he possibly manage to get the lost beasts home again?

As the sun came up, Ray examined closer. It couldn't have been an accident.

This was definitely a rustling. He'd found a stray spur beyond the gate, probably worn by an outlaw who had chosen to steal from him.

Not only would he end up spending most of the day mending the fence, but he would have to count and see how many had been lost. Mark would need to lead that, taking Ray's mother and Cynthia with him to take stock.

Even if only a few were lost, it was going to be a problem. It would cost Ray more than he was able to spare.

Releasing a roar of fury, he fell to his knees. The dew in the grass soaked through his trousers and Ray's face rested in the palms of his hands.

He couldn't believe this had happened. Not now, not when he was working so hard to do everything right. How could he possibly handle it all?

At last, he went back inside when he knew the others would be awake. He found his mother and Cynthia setting the table and Mark already there for breakfast.

"Ray? What is it?" Cynthia asked, seeing the expression on his face.

"I need to go into town and have a chat with the sheriff. It would seem that someone decided our cattle are worth rustling," he said, trying to remain stiff and emotionless.

Unfortunately, he couldn't help balling his hands into fists. Cynthia looked down at his hands and then back up at Ray. He couldn't meet her gaze.

No matter how hard he tried to hide his anger, he simply couldn't keep it under control.

There was so much at stake and Ray wondered if he was ever going to overcome the attacks coming at him from every side. No matter what he did, he was failing.

"Oh, Ray," his mother said with compassion. "What happened? Out in the fields?"

"Yes, Ma. I went out this morning and the fence was ruined. I need you three to go out and start counting. I know it's a tedious job, but it's important.

"I have to go to the sheriff, mend the fence yet again, and then I'll come help," he said.

"At least eat some breakfast before you go," his mother offered.

"I can't, Ma. Not right now. I'll be back later," he said.

Ray turned and left the room, ignoring his mother's pleas for him to come back.

"Ray! Come eat something. You need energy!" she called.

But he kept walking, down the hall and out the door before he was tempted to go back and eat.

He didn't have time for that now. Everything was coming apart and he needed to get to the sheriff early so he would have the rest of the day to catch up on the rest.

Once he made it into town, Ray went to the sheriff's office and found

him leaning back in his chair. He looked up at Ray and smiled.

“Well, howdy there. What can I do for you, Ray?” he asked.

“Sheriff, we’ve got a problem at the ranch. Rustlers. I don’t know how many cattle they got yet, but it’s not looking good for us,” he said.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” the sheriff said. “I didn’t get reports from anyone else, so it looks like they must have gone straight for you.

“All right, now, let’s see. When did you realize? Did you hear them in the night?”

The sheriff shuffled his papers around and started writing so he could get Ray’s account of the incident.

Ray told him everything that happened that morning and that they didn’t have all the information yet, but that he wanted the sheriff to know about it so everyone could have their eyes open for whomever might be trying to cause trouble.

“Good luck, Ray. We’ll keep a lookout for any sign of your cattle. You just let us know if there’s anything we can do to help.

“Once you’ve had a chance to count how many are missing, we’ll have a better idea what to do moving forward,” the sheriff said.

“Certainly, Sheriff. Thank you,” Ray said, tipping his hat and taking his leave.

He made his way back to the house and thought about the fact that they had been mending fences a lot lately. It seemed that it was a nonstop battle and Ray was beginning to wonder if this hadn’t been the first attempt on his animals.

Maybe he hadn’t paid close enough attention before. Maybe this was exactly what had taken place and he hadn’t realized it, thinking the problems with the fence and that bull escaping had just been a matter

of regular ranch maintenance.

But now, thinking back to that bull... It had happened right when Cynthia arrived. She had already seen him deal with this a few times.

Ray was feeling nothing short of embarrassment and, when he got back home, he was ready to apologize and suffer in his shame. What surprised him the most was that Cynthia was finishing up her usual morning chores and rushed over to him when he got there.

“Ray! I’m so glad you’re back. I needed to milk the cow and gather the eggs before I join Anita and Mark out there, counting the cattle.

“I’m glad I was still here. Are you all right?” she asked, taking his hand and holding it close.

He looked at her and gave a slight smile. She was so comforting, even though he didn’t think he deserved that comfort.

“I’m all right, Cynthia,” he said. “It was a difficult thing, realizing that I’d lost even more cattle. I’m overwhelmed, to be honest, constantly failing to keep up with the ranch.

“I never thought I would be the kind of man who can’t keep my affairs in order,” he said.

“That’s not true, Ray. Of course you can! Don’t think about it like that,” she said. “You had nothing to do with this and it’s not your fault.

“Honestly, it seems to me that you’ve done everything you possibly can for the ranch. If someone has rustled the cattle, it’s not your fault.

“What matters now is that we work hard and make sure we get them back.”

There was determination and compassion in her eyes and Ray brushed back Cynthia’s hair, admiring her gentle demeanor. He couldn’t

imagine how he came to be so lucky, but he was astonished by her, thankful that he'd gotten to marry someone who was so lovely.

She was more than just beautiful. She was perfect. In every way, she was the exact ideal he had always hoped for in a wife.

Cynthia was kind, but he could also see that she had a mind of her own... she just hadn't spoken up yet. Although in that moment he needed her soothing demeanor, he knew there was a part of her he still hadn't seen and Ray was determined she would eventually let it out.

"Thank you, Cynthia," he said.

She looked perplexed, but smiled. "For what?"

"You bring me a kind of hope and happiness I didn't expect in life. I wanted to marry a woman like you, but there was a part of me that didn't think I would ever actually find someone with your grace and sweet presence.

"You're so merciful when I make mistakes and you support me no matter what," he said.

"Of course I do. You're my husband and I'm proud of that. I would do anything to ensure we live a good life together, and I know part of that is just being here for you," she said.

"Regardless, it seems like every day there is some reason you should question your decision to come here and marry me, but you continually surprise me by diligently staying by my side," he said.

"I would never leave you, Ray. I just hope we can find these rustlers and get things back to normal.

"I'm still so new here that I don't entirely know what that is, but I can tell you don't feel things are the way they ought to be, and now this has happened. It has been hard for you, and for me, but I don't ever

want you to think I'm going to abandon you," she said.

A strange look crossed her face at her last words.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Cynthia swallowed and nodded, her eyes drifting from him in a way that seemed peculiar, as though she was hiding something. But when she looked at him again, she smiled, and Ray could tell that whatever it was that had bothered her, she didn't want to talk about it.

As tempted as he was to push, he felt it was important to respect that she might not be ready to share her thoughts with him yet.

"Well, all I can say is that I'm glad you're here. You have been a bright spot in these difficult times," Ray said.

"And you have been my joy since coming here," she replied.

Ray wished he could stand there with Cynthia for the rest of the day, just indulging in her company. She brought him so much joy.

But he also recognized that there wasn't time for that just now. He needed to get to work fixing the fence. And he needed Cynthia to go and count the cattle with the others.

"I'd best get to work. If you need anything, I'll be here, all right?" he said.

"Thank you, Ray. For everything," Cynthia replied.

With that, she turned away from him and finished gathering her things. He watched her for a moment and sighed in relief. No matter what happened, he had her.

But Ray had to make sure he didn't give her a reason to leave. What would he do if he lost more cattle and couldn't provide for her?

Thomas was just waiting to see him fail, and now Cynthia was counting on him.

Ray couldn't risk letting her down. If Cynthia had come all this way just to learn that her husband was a worthless fella without any real strength, she would regret the decision to ever marry him.

And that would break his heart.

There was much to do, and Ray had to ensure that he did it thoroughly and well.

It was the only way he could prove himself worthy of this woman, worthy of the ranch, and worthy of his father's legacy.

And if he failed? That was a question that would haunt him every moment unless he got this resolved.

It was clear to Cynthia that Ray was grieving what had happened, but he didn't seem to want to show her how hurt he was by the incident.

She understood it wounded his pride and upset him to experience such a loss.

She wished she could make it better, that she could help him through more than just counting cattle. But, in many ways, it seemed as though it was the only thing he would actually want from her.

No matter how hard she tried to ignore the feeling, Cynthia couldn't stop thinking that Ray was far more distressed about the loss of the cattle than he would ever be about her.

She wondered what was on his mind. Was he wishing that he hadn't come to bed? That he had stayed out even later the night before or that he had gotten up earlier?

And what did it mean for future nights? Would he still be there for Cynthia, or would he make a stronger effort to look after the ranch?

She didn't want to be torn by his behavior, but Cynthia couldn't help it. She found herself jealous of the ranch since it seemed to be his greatest passion, something she would never manage to live up to.

No matter what, no matter how badly she wanted to encourage and support Ray, Cynthia simply wasn't able to get over the fact that she

worried he would never love her with all his heart.

Not the way he loved the ranch.

Cynthia found herself out in the fields with Anita and Mark, counting to see how many cattle they could find. She imagined they were likely to be out here all day, looking for the vast number of black dots that lined the green grass.

“The herd is somewhere around one hundred and ninety-four. Ray will know the exact number. Most men would have more ranch hands for a herd this size, but Ray is so convinced he can do it all that he tries to keep costs down by having only Mark,” Anita explained.

“That must be very difficult for him, trying to take care of so many cattle without help,” Cynthia observed.

Mark came over to them and chuckled at their conversation.

“Oh, it’s tough,” he said. “Ray refuses to take on more fellas so he and I are near enough always out here.

“Don’t get me wrong, he lets me have breaks and seasons of rest, but he won’t take them for himself.”

“Has no one told him this is unreasonable?” Cynthia asked in surprise.

“We all have. Even the doctor. But it’s Ray. He wants to do everything,” Anita said.

“You know, Thomas is different,” Mark began. “He may be the worst man I’ve ever met, but he understands that in order to grow a ranch, a man needs help.

“He has around the same number of cattle as we do, but he has ten fellas working for him, making certain things are all right and that nothing happens to the herd.”

“Ten?” Cynthia asked in shock. “A herd this size needs ten men?”

“That would be normal. Eight to ten,” Anita said.

Cynthia couldn't believe it. That meant Ray was trying to run the ranch while also doing the job of nine ranch hands. All because he wanted to keep costs down.

How could he do something like that? It was absolutely foolish and he didn't see it.

“So, now you can see why we want him to slow down. Ray doesn't realize that he's killing himself by trying to handle everything, but we hope you do.

“We hope you can help us convince him that he can spare the extra money to take care of this place and give himself some rest,” Anita said.

“Of course I will. I'll do whatever I can to help,” she promised.

“Thank you. It's not easy, making someone like him understand that he has no choice, but this is our only option if we want things to be all right here,” Mark said.

Cynthia followed as they moved along, still trying to count the total number of cattle, but her mind was flooded with curiosity. She couldn't imagine why Ray had it in his mind that he had no choice other than forcing himself into this role.

Was he so determined to be better than Thomas, and to be better than his father, that he was willing to kill himself by working so hard?

He was far more devoted to the cattle and distressed about them than he would ever be about her, and Cynthia knew there wasn't a wife on earth who would be all right with that.

It wasn't fair and it wasn't right. Ray needed to figure out whether or

not he cared enough about her to value her above them.

Was she overreacting? Was she jaded, or was this a genuine worry?

“Cynthia!” came a call from behind.

She turned and saw Ray riding over to her. By now, Mark and Anita had gone east, while Cynthia was counting to the west.

She smiled at Ray as he approached, his expression a bit lighter now than it had been.

“Any news?” she asked.

“I fixed the fence, but that’s all. I don’t expect to hear anything from town today. Rustlers don’t usually transport cattle in front of everyone so it’s doubtful that we’ll have any witnesses,” he said.

“So, what are you planning for, moving forward? I’m sure you don’t want this to happen again,” she said.

“No, I really don’t. Most ranchers have other people, you know? They’ll watch over the herd. I’ve been a fool to rely on fences and depend on my land being safe enough.

“I think I’ve really only got one option,” he said.

Cynthia sighed in relief. She was so thankful that Ray would finally hire more ranch hands, just like his mother and Mark were saying.

“I’ll stay up as late as I can at night, and then we can take turns keeping watch,” he said. “It won’t be long-term and I’ll handle the bulk of it since I’m usually up late and out early anyway.

“I don’t sleep more than five or six hours most nights, so I reckon I can get by on three or four. Maybe you, Ma, and Mark can rotate every three nights, just to watch the herd for a few hours.”

Cynthia stared at him, disbelieving. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Was Ray really so much in denial?

"What?" he asked.

"Can't you see that you need to hire more men? Even just a couple?" she asked.

He looked perplexed for a moment and then breathed in, as if trying to make a decision.

"But there isn't anyone who knows this ranch like I do. I mean, you, Mark, and Ma, you all live here and I can trust you.

"Bringing someone else here and depending on them to take care of the herd like we would? That's a pretty tall order, Cynthia.

"I don't know that there's anyone out there who is going to make sure these cattle are in good shape," he said.

"You have to start trusting people, Ray. It's not good for you, the way you're killing yourself to try and do everything. It isn't helping. It's the reason you lost part of the herd in the first place.

"You have to take the time to rest and let other people do things for you," she insisted, her tone a little more demanding than she had intended.

Ray appeared shocked, but there was a part of his expression that seemed almost grateful. Perhaps, in his stubbornness, he hadn't really given it much thought until now that it was truly important for him to hire someone.

Cynthia hoped she was getting through to him, but she couldn't be sure. More than anything, she hoped he would have a chance for rest.

"Cynthia, I understand why you want me to hire someone. Ma and Mark have been trying to get me to do the same for a while. My pa

never needed all that extra help, though.

“He only had two other men, but one was his age and decided to settle down and the other moved west for gold. The ranch hasn’t grown much since he was in charge and if he didn’t need much extra help, I shouldn’t either,” he said.

“But he did have help. You just told me. That’s all I’m suggesting. Just two men,” she said.

“Two men cost an awful lot to hire, Cynthia,” he said.

“Do you really care about your ranch? It seems to me that if you care enough about this place, you would put in the investment to ensure everything is taken care of.

“A man who cares about his ranch wouldn’t waste time debating how much it costs to hire a couple fellas. He’d do whatever it takes to keep this place going and protect his cattle,” she said.

“And you don’t know anything about ranching, Cynthia. You’re new to this so I understand that you think you’re telling me what’s best, but I need you to listen. I’m doing what I can, here,” he said.

“Are you?” she challenged him.

Ray froze, apparently shocked that she had spoken back to him like that. But she couldn’t help herself. She was infuriated that he kept finding excuses.

It was time for him to make some decisions about what was important to him.

“I’m sorry, Cynthia,” he said, surprising her. “I know you don’t think I’m making the right decision.

“Although I do want to continue as I’ve been doing, you and the others seem to think I need more help. I will consider it. Honestly.

“I’ll think about whether or not we can afford it here on the ranch and, if it seems to be the right thing, I promise to hire on some additional ranch hands.”

Shocked that he had agreed, Cynthia exhaled in relief and smiled at him.

“Thank you, Ray,” she said. “I didn’t expect you to relent.”

“It’s clear everyone thinks I need this and I can’t let the ranch get away from me. I’ll do my best, but I will need some time.

“For now, let’s just get back to counting and see what’s going on,” he said, looking out across the fields before walking off.

Cynthia got back to her own duties, counting and hoping they would find that all were accounted for, despite evidence to the contrary. She worried Ray wouldn’t keep his promise, or that he would be so caught up in trying to find these cattle that he would neglect preventing the loss of more.

But underneath all of that, she still felt the rising bitterness. Ray was so caught up in his ranch and the herd that he barely noticed her.

He hardly seemed to care at all about her. What did it mean for their future?

Every time Cynthia thought she was getting a handle on her emotions, Ray would do something to remind her that she was just a part of his life, but certainly not the priority.

Had she been wrong to think that her husband would want to spend a lot of time with her and would be sure to show her she was important to him? Had she been a fool to think she deserved any kind of attention from him?

Discouraged and full of worry that things would never be good between them, Cynthia was beginning to wonder if this had been a

mistake, after all.

She'd promised Ray she would never leave him, and she would hold to that. Her vows meant so much to her.

But that didn't change the fact that she had come all the way here just to find that her husband didn't think much about her at all.

What if she pushed too hard? What if she insisted that he do these things and he got angry? Would it only make things worse? Would Ray send her away?

She started to think about the things Thomas had said and how he'd warned her against trusting Ray. He'd said she would never be as important to Ray as the ranch, and it certainly seemed that was true.

Cynthia had begun realizing that early on in the marriage, but it was now so palpably true that she couldn't bear it anymore.

Was Thomas right? Was she doomed to a life in which she would be constantly abandoned by her own husband?

Discouraged by the lack of news from the sheriff, Ray made his way back to Cynthia. She was standing in front of the shoe store when he saw her, eyeing a pair of shoes through the window.

Even as he approached, she didn't seem to hear him for she was so distracted by the pair of leather shoes she was gazing upon.

"They're lovely," he said, although he truly knew nothing about women's fashion or what made for a nice pair of shoes.

Cynthia was startled and turned to him with wide eyes, looking embarrassed that he had caught her.

"Hmm? Oh. Those? I suppose. I was just... I don't know. Maybe, they're all right," she said, stuttering.

Ray wondered why she was so ashamed that he had noticed her looking at the shoes. It seemed as though she felt bad about liking them, as if she thought it was wrong somehow.

He started to speak again when she interrupted.

"Did the sheriff say anything? Does he know who stole the cattle?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said. "He told me there were no other rustlings nearby for at least the past couple of months and I just happened to be very unlucky."

“That’s discouraging. He’s the sheriff. I had hoped he would tell you that he’s rallying everyone he can so they can track down your cattle,” she said.

“Our cattle,” Ray corrected her. “They’re not just mine, Cynthia. They’re ours. And I had hoped so, as well, but I ought to have known better.

“It’s not as though they can go out with me and try to track the herd. We lost thirty-two beasts, and they don’t just disappear all that easily.

“I’m thinking we’ll find a clue somehow and find where they got taken.”

“I hope so. I don’t want to see you struggling without them. I know how much they mean to you,” she said, a sudden edge in her voice.

“Well, yes. They do mean a lot to me. My pa did a whole lot to bring this ranch to where it is now and it’s up to me to ensure that I do my part moving forward.

“If I can’t, if I lose everything, it means I’m shaming his legacy,” Ray explained.

Cynthia looked at him and then looked down at the ground.

Things had been a bit tense between them and he knew she wanted him to start doing more to rest and focus on other things at the ranch.

He had also realized he wasn’t doing a great job of consistently teaching her to ride. It had been more every few days as opposed to every day like he’d promised.

He really was failing at a lot, these days. Instead of thinking about that, he tried to refocus his attention.

“I think they would look very nice on you,” he said, looking at the shoes.

She blushed at that but didn't respond, her eyes following his gaze to the shoes in the window.

"Do you like them, Cynthia? You can admit it if you do," he said, trying to coax her out of her shell a bit.

"Well, of course I think they're nice," she said, as though it really wasn't all that important.

"But just because they're a nice pair of shoes doesn't mean I was looking at them for anything special. I just noticed them."

"There's nothing wrong with that. We all like to have something nice now and then.

"Would you like them? I can get them for you," Ray said, hoping she would understand that the offer was genuine.

Her lips parted and he saw the temptation in her eyes, but Cynthia quickly shook her head. It seemed she didn't want to admit she liked them, but Ray couldn't understand why.

It didn't make sense. Couldn't she just admit she liked the shoes and she wanted them? He didn't understand why she was behaving as though there was something wrong with it.

"Why not?" he asked.

"I don't need them," she said. "I've never been one to spend money frivolously and since I don't need a pair of shoes, there's no reason to buy them.

"I much prefer to spend money only on important things," she added.

"But it's all right if you like them. I really don't mind getting you something special," he said, smiling.

"Thank you, Ray, but I don't want you to feel like you have to do

things like that for me. Honestly, I'm not the sort of woman who would ever put you out or demand niceties like this," she said with an air of pride.

Ray wanted to argue, to tell her that it wasn't putting him out or that he didn't have a problem with getting her something.

Unfortunately, it seemed Cynthia was determined not to accept anything from him. He sensed that she liked knowing she couldn't be swayed or bought, and he didn't want to disrespect that.

It was difficult, sometimes, trying to discern what she expected from him. There were times when he felt like he was failing because he wasn't doing enough for her, and then there were times like this, when he was trying to do something nice but she refused.

He couldn't figure her out. She didn't seem to know what she wanted from him and he was growing somewhat weary of all the different expectations.

"Well, if you're sure," he said with disappointment.

But his own disappointed tone didn't compare to the forlorn expression in her eyes when she realized that he wasn't going to get them for her. Ray tried to hide his frustration.

If she wanted the shoes, couldn't she have just asked for them? And if not ask, couldn't she have accepted it when he tried to offer to buy them?

From down the street, Ray felt a cloud come over them and he looked up to see none other than Thomas watching them.

He had a wicked grin on his face and he was chewing a piece of straw, which was rather unusual for a man like Thomas who tended to be more refined than the other ranchers in the area.

Ray wondered what he was doing and why he was watching, but it

was enough for Ray to make a firm decision. He needed to get the shoes for Cynthia.

And if she was going to stand there and refuse, not admitting that he wanted him to buy them for her, he would have to send her off to find his mother so he could get them while she was gone.

“Cynthia,” he said, still glancing back at Thomas now and then to be sure that he wasn’t coming closer.

“Yes?” she asked, looking up at him.

“I think Ma went to the general store. Why don’t you go on and find her? I’ll be right here. You should take your time, help her find a few things,” he said.

“Certainly, I would be happy to do that,” Cynthia said dutifully.

Ray almost stopped her and told her that she didn’t have to be so obedient all the time, but it seemed like she was trying to make up for the fact that she had boldly talked back to him the day before. He liked seeing that fire in her, but she was so cautious and even fearful not to show it.

Wondering if she would ever let it out and give him a piece of her mind, Ray watched her go. He would never again find a woman like Cynthia, and he was glad she was in his life already.

Once she was up the street a little ways and had nearly reached the general store, Ray turned to look back at Thomas, who was still standing just beyond the saloon, eyeing him.

Confident that Thomas wouldn’t go after Cynthia this time, Ray went inside the shoe store instead of confronting Thomas, determined to get that pair of shoes for Cynthia.

“Excuse me,” he said, entering the shop.

“Ah, Ray, nice to see you,” said Milton Hopp, the store’s owner.

“You too, Milton. I’m here about that fine pair of shoes in the window. I think my wife would look lovely in them,” he said.

“I’m sure she would. She isn’t here to try them on?” Milton asked.

“No, it’s a surprise,” Ray said.

“Understood. Well, if they don’t fit, you can just bring her back in to try on a few pairs and find the right size. Otherwise, I can make her a pair that looks like this one.

“Is there anything else I can get you?” Milton asked.

“Just this for now. I don’t know what else she would like, but I’m sure I’ll be back soon enough for something else,” Ray said.

“Well, that’s nice of you. She’ll like these. They are very comfortable,” Milton said, wrapping the shoes up in cloth.

Ray was glad to be getting the shoes for Cynthia, thinking it was certainly an appropriate gift. He hoped she would think well of them and be happy that she was able to wear something so nice.

She really didn’t have anything all that fancy to wear around, and these shoes were both beautiful and practical. Ray was especially excited to see her face when she put them on for the first time.

“So, is there an occasion for these or is she in need of them?” Milton asked.

Ray started to speak, but knew that his words would be a lie. He simply gave a shrug instead.

“Just a little something,” he said.

The truth was that this gift would not have happened had he not seen

Thomas standing there, watching them. More than likely, he would have listened to Cynthia's protests and chosen not to get her anything.

After all, if she was so insistent that she didn't need them, why would he waste time and money to buy them?

But he had seen Thomas. He wouldn't let Thomas get one up on him.

Ray needed to show that he could provide for his wife, and he wouldn't let that man have a moment to try and insert himself or get in the way.

It was already difficult enough, knowing Thomas was interested in her.

Whenever Ray was feeling insecure about his marriage or he was reminded that it was so new, he would have a flash of worry, thinking about Thomas.

What would happen if Thomas tried to step in again? And why was Cynthia still so shy with Ray?

Sometimes, he was worried that she was still interested in Thomas. No matter how hard he tried to ignore it, Ray couldn't help thinking that Cynthia might have had feelings for him or been impressed by him.

Admittedly, Thomas was wealthy, young, and he was a bit more sophisticated than Ray. He'd lived a life with more adventure and he was more refined.

Thomas understood the city life and he knew what it was like to not have immediate family. Was it possible that they had bonded?

Ray tried to ignore those worries, but he was constantly fighting them, tired of competing with Thomas all the time and knowing that Thomas tended to be the one ruling things in the town these days.

If Thomas was so much more successful than Ray, as had been

happening of late, it meant Ray would have to work ten times harder to keep his wife happy and provided for.

That meant showing he was better than Thomas and he could handle things better.

“Here you are,” Milton said, handing Ray the shoes as Ray handed him the money in return.

“Don’t forget. You can always bring her in and we can check her size and ensure she has something that fits well. But I hope she likes these,” he added.

“Thank you,” Ray said. “I’m sure she will.”

He took the shoes and smiled, holding the fabric bag and feeling hopeful he had just done something that was going to help him and Cynthia grow closer.

If she could see that he cared for her, that he wanted to do what was best for her and make her happy, maybe she would understand that he wasn’t as obsessed with the ranch as she seemed to think.

He had been following through on his promise and had done some calculations, considering what it would take to hire on more men. It was tempting, to be sure.

Ray had been thinking about it a lot lately and was working toward making that a reality.

It would still take time, but he thought it would work and that, within the next few months, he would be able to do so.

And in the meantime? He would need to focus on keeping rustlers away from the ranch, keeping his wife happy, ensuring his mother was taken care of and not overburdened, and hope with all his heart that he wouldn’t lose Mark to some easier ranch to work on.

It really was a heavy burden to bear.

Ray went out into the street and looked across to see if Thomas was still there. Mercifully, he was gone. That man was always at the center of Ray's troubles.

The way he worked to try and tear Ray down, it wouldn't have surprised Ray at all if Thomas just came right out and tried to sweep Cynthia away.

But Ray had chosen to trust her. He wasn't going to let her go without fighting for her.

He was falling in love, and that meant that he had to do whatever it might take to keep his wife by his side.

Cynthia was looking around at a few trinkets in the general store while Anita continued chatting with the owner about how many pounds of wheat, barley, and sugar she needed.

It was clear Cynthia had a whole lot to learn about getting things from a shop like this, but for now, she was focused on looking at the items throughout the store.

She heard the door open and glanced that way to see if it was Ray, but her heart raced with dread when she saw Thomas instead.

How was it that he always seemed to know when she was in town? Why did he always come to find her? Was he going to speak to her while Anita was there?

She looked away from him quickly and continued focusing on the little items stacked neatly on the shelves. Cynthia picked up a few tools, just to look as though she was interested and busy.

Thomas had given her an ultimatum, hadn't he? He had urged her to take a week to figure out if she wanted to be with him.

She was quite sure that she didn't, but was he really coming to find out? Had it been a week already?

Cynthia took a deep breath and chose to forget about him as best she could, looking instead at the sewing supplies and listening to Anita's conversation.

“Oh, yes, but it’s very coarsely ground. Are you sure you don’t have anything a bit finer?”

“I need it for my rye. You know how much everyone loves my rye, but I can’t make it properly with something like this,” she was saying.

Cynthia glanced over at Anita and took a few steps closer, although she was still on the far end of the shop. She figured it would alert Thomas to stay away from her, hoping he was too much of a coward to come and talk to her while her mother-in-law was present.

If he was audacious enough to approach her then, Cynthia was sure he was as mad as a man could be.

“How about this, Anita?” the shopkeeper asked, opening another sack for her to look at. She inspected the flour and Cynthia watched, keeping her gaze trained on her mother-in-law.

As she did, she could see Thomas from the corner of her eye. He was getting closer.

He was standing around and she saw, without looking at him directly, that he kept picking things up, looking at them closely. It seemed as though he was merely pretending to be interested in the items but was actually looking at her.

Risking a sideways glance at Thomas, Cynthia was shocked. Indeed, he was eyeing her, a smirk on his face that reeked of arrogance.

How could he be so bold at some times and so gentle at others? He was an enigma to her, but not in a way that made her curious to learn more.

Cynthia just wanted Thomas to leave her alone, but he seemed unwilling to hear that from her. Whenever she tried to say it, he wouldn’t listen.

“This looks good,” Anita said. “Cynthia, come here.”

Relieved, Cynthia rushed to the front and Anita gestured to the bag of rye.

“What do you think? I was hoping I could show you my recipe tomorrow, but I want you to get a good feel for what kind of flour we want.

“See that one? It’s very coarse. Do you think this looks better?” Anita asked.

It seemed to be a quiz and Cynthia had no knowledge of what made for good rye flour and what didn’t. She had always made wheat bread back home and this was entirely new to her.

Still, she had heard Anita speaking with the shopkeeper about it, so she looked at which one was finer and pointed.

“That one definitely looks better. I think once you show me how you make your bread, I’ll be able to discern it more easily. But I agree that this one looks good,” she said.

Anita appeared to be appeased by that and she turned to the shopkeeper.

“We’re agreed. I will take five pounds of it. I want to have enough bread to give to some of our friends, as well,” she said.

Cynthia stayed close, but she was still acutely aware of Thomas, although no one else seemed to be. She was tempted to say something to Anita, but what could she say?

Cynthia had no proof of Thomas’s behavior. Everything improper that he had said to her was done when it was just the two of them, alone.

She couldn’t tell anyone what had happened without them questioning her integrity, as well.

Not only that, but Ray had overreacted before and she didn’t want to

say anything more to him about it. As far as other people in the town, it was difficult because Thomas had a good reputation.

What would happen if she tried to share her concerns and no one believed her? What would she do then?

Things were going better with Ray—well, some days they were, and some days she was just as confused as before. Still, she wanted to keep things better.

She wanted to be happy with him and not give him another reason to be upset, with her or with Thomas.

If she were to tell Ray about this incident, it would only make him jealous and angry all over again. That was something she simply couldn't handle.

As Cynthia was feeling tormented by all these worries, she glanced back to see that Thomas was gone. She hadn't heard the door, but he had simply disappeared and, for a moment, she wondered if she had imagined him altogether.

It was strange how quickly he had vanished, but she was deeply relieved. He made her so uncomfortable and anxious that it couldn't have been better.

But as she looked around, the door did open and Cynthia was relieved when Ray walked in with a smile on his face. She rushed over to him, leaving Anita at the counter so she could see Ray.

Taking a deep breath, she took his hand. He had a sack in the other, but Cynthia ignored it, simply glad that her husband was there.

Their eyes locked, and she wanted to kiss him. The thought alone was enough to make her blush, but she tried to hold back and, instead, smiled at Ray with an expression she hoped carried the weight of her heart.

“Is everything all right?” he asked, clearly aware that she was feeling something deep and intense.

“Yes, it is,” she said. “I’m just relieved you’re here. I suppose I was worried when you weren’t.”

“Why?”

Cynthia didn’t know what to say in response to that question. Why was she so worried? Thomas wasn’t going to do anything to her, not really. She didn’t have to be so scared of him.

She only needed to focus on the man who was her husband and be relieved that he was with her.

“I just like being with you and I get sad when we’re apart,” she said, the affection she felt for him overwhelming all the worries, fears, and anxieties that seemed to constantly threaten her happiness.

“I’ll admit I’m a bit taken aback, but I don’t mind it,” he said with a laugh.

“I’m sorry I haven’t done more to show you how much I enjoy being around you,” Cynthia said.

“No, it’s my fault,” Ray replied. “I’m the one who hasn’t done enough.”

But there was a playful grin amidst his words and Cynthia felt that he was keeping a cheerful secret from her. She wanted to know what it was but didn’t want to push, so she stayed patient, confident that he would tell her in time.

“Anyway, I came in here to let you both know we can head home whenever you’re ready,” he said.

“I think your ma is still bartering for cheaper rye,” Cynthia said.

"I am not bartering!" his mother laughed, defensively. "I'm simply trying to get the best they have."

"Well, whatever you pick, Ma, I'm sure it will be good. Your rye is the best in town," Ray said.

"And it's the best for a reason. It's because I work so hard to get the best ingredients," she said.

"And, as a matter of fact, I have everything and I'm finished. We may go home whenever it's convenient."

"Perfect," Ray said. "I'm ready."

Cynthia followed them, still feeling the weight of the visit from Thomas. She couldn't understand why he had come or what he wanted from her, but she was determined to push against it.

If it had, indeed, been a full week, she knew her answer.

If Thomas came to her and asked what she was going to do, she would tell him the same as she had before. She had made a commitment to Ray and she intended to keep it.

Yes, Ray was in love with his ranch, but he was still her husband. While he perhaps cared more about the animals and the duties that made up his life than he cared about her, it didn't matter.

She had moved here to be with him and Cynthia was going to do whatever it took to be a good wife. She wanted to make her husband happy and Thomas wasn't going to change that.

His pride would be his downfall, of that she was sure. If he kept coming after her like this, Ray would find out eventually and he would not take kindly to it.

In fact, Cynthia was starting to feel bad for Thomas. Did he know what he was getting himself into? Did he know what was coming next

if he didn't stand down?

It would be an ugly thing, indeed. A small part of Cynthia hoped it would happen soon.

Sure, she didn't want to see all the ugliness, but she did want Thomas to leave her alone and, if this was what it would take, she was willing to see to it that the end would come quickly.

They made their way back to the house and her thoughts were still so heavy. Cynthia helped Ray carry things inside so Anita didn't have to, especially the larger items like the flour and sugar.

"They hardly weigh anything at all! The rye is only five pounds," Anita argued.

"And that's five pounds more than I want you carrying, Ma," Ray argued.

Cynthia laughed as they fought about it. It was clear Ray had gotten his stubbornness from Anita and it was charming to watch the mother and son together like this.

Cynthia wondered if she and Ray would have children any time soon and, if so, would they be stubborn and determined like Ray? Would they be adventurous and flexible like Cynthia?

Would they use those qualities for good things?

Cynthia tried to get the last sack from the buckboard, but Ray rushed to stop her. She froze, waiting for him to explain.

"Don't take that just yet," he said.

"Sorry, I didn't realize it was important," she apologized.

"No, it's all right. It's just... well, I want to show you inside. Come with me," he said.

Cynthia followed Ray to their room and he sat on the bed, gesturing for her to sit beside him. He smiled and looked at her, rather sheepishly.

“I know I’ve been distracted and I maybe haven’t been the best husband. I want to change that. This isn’t much, but I hope it’s a start,” he said.

With that, Ray handed the bag over. Cynthia’s heart began to pound, nervous about what it might be.

She took a deep breath and opened the sack.

Ray held his breath, desperately excited to see what Cynthia would say when she realized he had bought her the shoes after all. She reached into the sack and pulled out the first bundle of fabric.

Slowly unwrapping it, she looked up at him. Understanding dawned on her face once she could feel what was under the layers. At last, she pulled out the shoe and gasped.

“Ray!” she exclaimed, her eyes bright with delight.

“Do you like them? It seemed like you did. Is this the right pair?” he asked.

She nodded eagerly, tears glistening in her eyes. Ray was thrilled that she seemed to like them so much.

She appeared to be shocked, although he had worried she might figure it out or that it wouldn’t be so special, after all. It seemed he had succeeded in his goals.

“Thank you so much, Ray,” she said, delighted.

“I’m so glad you’re happy,” he said.

“I am. I’ve never had such a nice gift. I didn’t expect you to get these for me and I really don’t know what to say to express how thankful I am.

“This is too much,” she said, laughing through her joyful tears.

“It’s not too much. In fact, it’s not nearly enough. Cynthia, I have been so neglectful at times. I want you to know that I’m trying to be better.

“I’m aware that I focus a lot on the ranch, but I do care about you and it’s important to me that you know it,” he said.

Ray hadn’t expected those words to come out of his mouth, but he knew it was exactly what needed to be said. Cynthia seemed to need that sense of encouragement, the understanding.

He didn’t know what more to say, but this was all he had to offer and it was the most important truth for her to know. What else could he say or do?

“You’re so generous. I didn’t expect something this marvelous, but you have given me a truly wonderful gift.

“If Joyce could see me in these, she wouldn’t believe I was the same woman,” Cynthia laughed.

“Is that so?” Ray asked.

“Honestly, I think she would tease me, but it would be out of nothing but jealousy,” she replied in amusement.

“I’m glad you like them,” he said again, although the truth was that he was glad he had done something right. It was only just that he would finally get her something that mattered.

It was a sweet, beautiful moment. Ray held onto the fact that he had made his wife happy, even though he still had so many questions and worries.

This was where it all began, though, wasn’t it? He had needed to at least do something to woo her, and these shoes were a good step.

“Ray, I’m truly thankful for these. They are beautiful and I never imagined having anything so lovely. You are a wonderful husband,” she said.

Ray’s heart swelled with happiness, hardly believing that Cynthia had just told him the one thing he truly needed to hear. It was incredible, being told that he made her this happy.

He hadn’t imagined that he would ever manage to give her the life she deserved, but he’d been working so hard. Most days, he felt like a failure.

But this? Now, he knew that he had succeeded, that he was doing exactly what he needed to do.

Ray heard a knock at the door and he figured his mother would get it, but after a moment, the knock sounded again.

“I’m not sure who that is, but Ma will handle it,” Ray said to Cynthia.

“Oh, I think she went outside. She told me she had to check for the radishes to go with dinner,” Cynthia told him.

Ray winced, realizing it meant he would have to leave Cynthia for a moment and go check who was at the door. But he relented and gave her a nod to stay put so they could talk more when he came back.

The last thing he wanted was to have their moment together interrupted.

Ray got to the door and opened it, but there was no one there. He just saw a distant figure riding off, a silhouette without a face.

He had a deep, uncomfortable feeling in his gut, like there was more to this than he might realize and that if he had come to the door sooner, he may have had an answer.

There wasn’t any reason for this person to ride off like this. It was a

strange response when Ray had come quickly after the second knock. Whoever it was, they had gone quickly.

Ray figured he would just go back inside, but something didn't sit right with him. When he looked down, he saw a box had been left. It was addressed to Cynthia.

Confused, Ray felt his heart race with curiosity. He didn't like this at all, but he didn't want to overreact.

So often, lately, he feared he was being too controlling about everything in his life, and he didn't want to suffocate Cynthia by doing the same to her. It wasn't fair.

And yet, there had to be an explanation for this. He needed to know what it was.

Who could have left her something like this? He figured it must be from Joyce. Maybe she had decided to send something for Cynthia from Chicago.

It would have been a nice gesture, and Ray figured it was just a little trinket. But if it was something else, he was confused.

Worry settled into his gut as he took it to Cynthia, knowing there was a slim chance it was actually from Joyce. There was no proper address on the box, just Cynthia's name.

It wouldn't have gotten through the post service like this.

"Cynthia?" he asked, coming back into their room. She sat there, patiently waiting for him to continue. "Looks like I'm not the only one to get you something today."

"What's that?" she asked. Her eyes were wide but instead of excitement or eagerness, he saw fear in her gaze.

Ray could tell she was every bit as dubious about the package as he

was, which brought him a good deal of relief to know she wasn't eager for it. It meant she hadn't been expecting it.

"Good question. It was left at the door," he said.

"For me?"

"Yes, it's for you. I'm not sure who it's from or anything," Ray said, wary as he handed over the box.

Cynthia took it and looked up at him with worry in her eyes, as well. He saw something else, too. Was it shame? Had something happened that he didn't know about?

Ray waited as Cynthia took the piece of paper with her name on it and examined it for any sign as to who might have sent it or what it might be.

She didn't seem to have any more idea than he did, but Ray was still suspicious, unable to stop himself from wondering what had happened and who this had come from.

Slowly, cautiously, Cynthia opened the box to reveal a striking pair of shoes, easily worth double the ones he had just bought her.

Ray looked at the shoes and his jaw dropped, but he immediately looked up at Cynthia to see how she responded. She looked up at him and swallowed, distinctly uncomfortable, as though wondering what was happening.

A part of Ray wanted to believe that she was as shocked as she seemed, but he didn't know what to think. Was it possible she was hiding something from him?

It was too much of a coincidence that he had just bought her shoes and now these showed up. And Thomas had been watching them; he had seen Ray and Cynthia outside the shoe store.

Had Thomas gone in after and bought something nicer? Was it possible he would be so bold and so terribly rude?

“Cynthia? Who are these from?” Ray asked, trying to maintain an even tone of voice. He didn’t want to accuse her of anything, but if Cynthia knew, he expected her to be honest with him.

He couldn’t come out and say what he thought, but he could give her a chance to clarify. At least if she did know, she might be able to give him some peace of mind so he didn’t overreact.

Then again, he was already drawing his own conclusions and Ray knew it would be difficult for him to respond any gentler than he was already doing.

He needed to take a deep breath and stay calm, but he wasn’t sure how best to handle seeing his wife receive a better gift from a man other than himself.

“I have no idea,” she said, answering his question. “I don’t know who would send me shoes like this. Besides, I don’t need shoes. You just bought me a pair.”

She said the last part with a desperate smile and Ray was angry that she wanted to appease him. Clearly she really did know, just as he did, that this was another strategy from Thomas to drive a wedge between them.

“Are you sure? I can’t imagine someone would just leave shoes at the door and you don’t even know who they’re from,” he said.

“I wish I had an answer for you, Ray, but I don’t,” she replied, shrinking back. “I can’t imagine who would leave me a gift like this. You just bought me the loveliest shoes I have ever seen.”

Ray scoffed. He looked at the leather shoes that he had bought for Cynthia.

They were still lying there beside her on the bed, unwrapped from burlap fabric, taken out of a sack. There was nothing fancy about them at all.

And now, here was a pair of ankle-high brown boots with a slight heel to them. They were extremely sophisticated, with round, leather-cased buttons that went up along the outside ankle.

Cynthia would be able to wear them anywhere and people would know she was a fashionable woman, that she had wealth, even.

They weren't suited for someone working a ranch like his. They were for a woman of leisure, someone who didn't have to do as much work as Ray expected of his wife.

"I'm sorry, Ray. I honestly don't know what to tell you. I think maybe it could be from Chicago.

"It's possible Joyce sent me these, but I can't imagine that she would be able to send me something like this so soon after getting there and getting married.

"Also, she would have sent me a letter or something. But maybe not.

"It must have been a gift from her, after all. Who else could it be from?" she asked, clearly racing through explanations to find something that made sense.

"It seems to me like we both know who sent these for you," Ray said in a low growl. He didn't want to admit it, but he had to accept the fact.

Although Cynthia still looked embarrassed, they both knew exactly who these shoes were from and Ray was tired of trying to ignore it, tired of trying to be better than Thomas.

Was Thomas really trying to woo his wife? And, if so, how did Cynthia feel about it?

Could Ray really trust her at all?

Cynthia was not only embarrassed, she was panicked. She couldn't believe Thomas had done something so bold.

This was the last thing he ought to have done, and he surely knew it would create problems for Cynthia and Ray. Of course, Ray was furious and jealous.

She had a terrible feeling things were going to get even worse than they had been before.

The quaint room around them seemed to spin as they sat on the bed they had shared, lying next to one another at night without ever having shared the intimacy of a husband and wife.

And now, there was a further wedge between them. Now, this had come crashing down on Cynthia, and she knew that she had made a mistake in trusting that Thomas would finally leave her alone and respect that she didn't want anything to do with him.

Instead, she was struggling to get through even a moment without Ray being suspicious of her.

It hadn't taken much to make him angry and Thomas had succeeded through this act.

Cynthia wasn't sure how to make it better, but it seemed by denying that she knew anything, she had only made it worse. Now, Ray really didn't seem to trust her.

But why did she have to admit to knowing it was Thomas who sent this? She hadn't asked for the gift. She hadn't wanted the shoes.

She loved the ones Ray bought for her and had never even taken time to look at other pairs. She had never gone inside the shop and now she had these ones from Ray, she had no reason to.

She had been happy a moment ago, so happy.

But Thomas...

He had clearly made a decision that he would take a step further. He was making an effort to woo Cynthia and show her his interest, but he was doing so by insulting Ray and trying to get between them.

He had sent her more expensive shoes than Ray had bought her. And he had done it right in front of Ray to make him angry.

Cynthia didn't know what to do to make things right, but she couldn't take the blame for something she hadn't asked for.

"Ray, I'm sorry for whatever was behind this. We can just leave the shoes on the porch and maybe whoever sent them, whether or not it was Thomas, maybe he'll come back and take them when he sees I don't want them.

"Or we can give them to your mother, even. I don't mind. But I don't want them," she said.

"Right, so when this fella who clearly cares about you sees them on my ma, he can attack her and accuse her of stealing them from you?" Ray asked, dramatically.

"I don't think anyone is going to do something so harsh and violent. I'm just trying to tell you that I don't want them and I won't accept them.

"Whatever you think we should do about it, I'm happy to give it a

try,” she said.

“Cynthia,” Ray began, his tone even though she could see his fury, “I have to ask you something very plainly.”

Her gut turned, knowing that Ray was about to ask about Thomas.

How could she convince him that there was nothing to be worried about? Why would he believe her now, when Thomas had made it look as though he would do anything to get her attention?

“You can ask me anything, Ray. I’m going to be honest with you,” she committed.

“Good. Because I need to know if there is something going on,” he said.

“And what do you mean by ‘going on’? I can tell you’re suspicious of me. Can you be more clear?” she asked, trying to remain steady despite being offended by his words.

“I want to know if there’s something going on between you and... and another man,” he said.

Embarrassed that her husband would have to ask her such a thing, Cynthia chewed her lip for a moment. She realized it might look like hesitation, but it was only an effort to stop herself from crying.

“There is nothing going on, Ray. I promise you. I will be completely honest and tell you there is nothing happening between me or any man. Not for my part, at least,” she said, clarifying at the end.

Surely Ray knew Thomas had shown his interest. Cynthia had already seen Ray get jealous about it.

So why didn’t he accept that she had nothing to do with it and that this was the effort of another man without her consent?

“Are you sure?” he asked.

By now, Cynthia was truly growing offended. How could he keep asking her this?

The last thing she wanted was for him to think she was flirting with another man. She couldn't let Ray leave her because of a misunderstanding.

“I don't know what all of this is about, Ray. I haven't been interacting with anyone. I've already told you that Thomas has come and spoken to me and I was never trying to hide anything.

It's true that he's come to me multiple times and I know it made you angry, but I never flirted with him or tried to encourage his interests,” she said, determined that Ray wouldn't get the wrong idea.

“You say that, but how am I supposed to know? I wasn't there,” he said.

Cynthia glared at him, unable to stop herself, standing and balling her hands into fists. She had done nothing to bring on this attitude.

She had been loyal, even when it was difficult. She had been a good wife. Why was he letting jealousy and pride and rivalry get in the way of that?

“You think you have to be there to know that I am loyal to you? What sort of woman do you take me for, Ray? I wouldn't have told you about all of that if I hadn't wanted you to know.

“If there was something between me and Thomas that I was trying to hide, it would have been pointless for me to inform you about what he was doing. Did you never think about that?” she asked.

“It doesn't matter that you told me because you may not have told me everything. I know you didn't encourage him to come and talk to you in the first place, but that doesn't mean you didn't...”

“Didn’t what?” she interjected.

“It doesn’t mean that things didn’t change, eventually. It’s possible you noticed something about him that surprised you or interested you,” Ray said.

“What are you talking about? What about him could possibly interest me? I don’t understand, Ray. I don’t know how I gave you the impression that I wouldn’t be faithful to you,” she said.

“But your original intentions are one thing. This is another.

“We have reached a point where he is sending you gifts and you have to understand why I would be a bit more curious now than I was before.

“Back then, I was just mad at Thomas for even trying, but this? You have to admit it seems like quite an investment if it’s as hopeless as you say it is,” Ray said with a bitter laugh.

“Is that so? You think I’m a wasted investment because someone is foolish enough to try and woo me when I’m already married?” she asked.

“That isn’t what I said and you know it,” Ray shot back. “Don’t misinterpret my words.”

“Well, you are misinterpreting everything about this situation, so I believe I am entitled to address your mistake in this area,” she said.

For a moment, they paused in the heated debate, each regrouping their own thoughts. Cynthia tried to understand what was going on right before her eyes.

She couldn’t understand why Ray wouldn’t listen. It almost seemed as though he wanted her to be responsible for this. Did he need the excuse?

Was this a reason he could send her away and blame her for it instead of accepting his own fault?

At last, Ray took a deep breath and Cynthia looked up at him, waiting for him to speak again.

“You know what I’m asking, Cynthia. Do you have feelings for Thomas?”

The question hung in the air and Cynthia’s skin prickled with anger. She eyed her insistent husband, the way he looked at her with insecurity and arrogance rolled into one.

She had seen so many sides to Ray, including sides she had begun to love. But this was too much. This was hurtful.

“That is an awful assumption to make, Ray Crocker,” she said firmly, trying to remain calm but unable to stop her nostrils from flaring and her eyes from narrowing.

“Maybe if you were around more, you would know my character. You would know that I would never betray my husband.”

Ray leaned back slightly, clearly taken aback by her anger and determination to make him understand.

“I have done nothing to betray you, nothing to shame you. I have been here for you and I have been a diligent wife who carries the duties you have given me.

“I have let you push me aside so you can focus on the ranch and your animals, and I have worked hard to try and keep up with you. What I have not done is give my attention to another man and I never expected you to be so foolish as to think I would.

“I didn’t know you were that sort of man,” she said, barely able to contain herself.

“I... I...” Ray stuttered, but he clearly didn’t know what to say.

Cynthia waited a moment, hoping he would apologize, hoping he would tell her how sorry he was and beg her to forgive him. After all, this was his fault.

He had been the one to overreact and think poorly of her.

“Is that all you have to say to me?” she finally asked, challenging him if he wasn’t able to say it on his own.

“You have to understand. I don’t know what’s going on or why you are getting gifts from another man in town. It’s not right and I won’t stand for it.

“I need to know why Thomas thinks he can do this,” Ray said, trying to justify his accusations.

“Then you can go and ask him,” Cynthia spat. “Go to Thomas and find out why he’s sending me things if you’re so upset about it. You can yell at him, threaten him, do whatever you want.

“I don’t care anymore. But what you cannot do—what I will not let you do—is accuse me of being the sort of woman who would go off and flirt with another man.

“I will not let you suggest that I am disloyal to you.”

With that, Cynthia turned and stormed out of the bedroom, leaving Ray behind. He was silent, not calling after her with the apologies she deserved. He had been neglectful and now offensive.

She needed some time away from him to figure out what she was going to do next, because it made no sense to stay there while he was treating her this way and while he thought it was appropriate to think so poorly of his wife.

Still, she didn’t know what to do. There were no real options for

Cynthia. She didn't like Thomas.

He was a bad, manipulative man. He was always able to bring out her deepest insecurities and, through the sending of the shoes, he had brought out Ray's ugliest side, as well.

No, Cynthia would never turn to him, no matter how many promises he made to always be there for her. Even if she could trust Thomas and thought he wouldn't abandon her, he had done too many things now for her to ever believe he was a decent man.

It didn't make sense to trust him when he'd given her no reason to.

But how could she stay here? She was so upset about Ray's behavior. Not only that, but even if she didn't leave him, what would he say? What if he sent her away under false pretenses?

What if he accused her of adultery and ruined her reputation because of his misunderstandings? What would she do then?

Cynthia had just begun to trust Ray. It was infuriating that every time things got better between them, he would do something to make it harder for her to see those good things.

One day, they would be getting closer. They would express how much they cared for one another through small gestures.

Even before the shoes came, Cynthia had wanted to kiss him again, just as she had wanted to in the general store. It was so difficult to stop herself from doing so. And then, this happened.

And with this accusation, she started to ask herself if she had made mistakes, as well.

Maybe she hadn't been firm enough with Thomas. Was she being foolish in thinking he would understand she didn't like him?

Maybe it was time to go to him and tell him, once and for all, to leave

her alone. Indeed, that had to be the solution.

If Cynthia could get rid of Thomas for good, Ray would understand that she meant no harm. He would want her to stay at the ranch.

They could have the happy life together that she was fighting for. At last, things would be all right.

She had to have hope. Even if it was foolish, there was no other choice than to see it out.

And if Ray was willing to listen, if he would just apologize and see his wrong, they might finally have a future worthy of all this trouble.

Ray was overcome with dismay, feeling like a terrible failure.

What had he done? Why had he allowed things to get to this point? If only he hadn't been so quick to respond!

He really hadn't done well to take care of Cynthia, that much was obvious.

No matter how hard he tried, he only managed to make things worse between them, and that was enough to break his heart. After all, if he couldn't take care of his wife, what good was he?

Not only had he failed, but he'd also hurt Cynthia's feelings. She was crushed by his anger and it was clear she was feeling insecure after his outburst.

There was a part of Ray that couldn't help feeling he was justified in asking her about this, in trying to find out whether or not she might have feelings for Thomas, but that clearly wasn't something she wanted to hear. It was nonsense for him to even ask.

Despite his regret, Ray needed to move forward and do something to make things right.

He had tried to spoil her by buying that fine pair of shoes, but being shown up by Thomas had only made him regret trying.

Now, when there was nothing more he could do, Ray sensed he needed to confront Thomas again.

This time, it was clear Thomas was unashamedly coming after Cynthia. Ray hoped this meant the conversation would be more honest between him and Thomas. At last, there was nothing to hide.

Ray saddled up his horse and headed out, riding toward Thomas's ranch with determination and an underlying fury. He wasn't going to put up with this any longer.

By the time he arrived, he had managed to push down the anger enough that he could have a reasonable talk with Thomas.

"Well, who do I see coming up along here?" Thomas asked with a laugh, leaning back in the rocking chair on his porch.

"You don't work during the day? It's a wonder you've managed to accomplish anything at all," Ray accused in reply.

"A man of my skills doesn't need to do much in the way of work. You see, I have enough fellas to run the ranch for me that all I really have to do is supervise and occasionally wrangle a steer," he answered.

Ray tried not to scoff at Thomas's attempt to sound tough. It was amusing, but he feared he would only look jealous if he showed his irritation.

Moreover, he felt perfectly smug to acknowledge Thomas's bragging. Thomas was making every effort to sound like a better man than he was.

"Your ranch hands sure are lucky to have someone like you to take care of them," Ray said, diminishing his sarcasm so that Thomas would only read into it if he wanted to.

"You bet they're lucky, but they know that well enough. It isn't as though they have a reason to doubt me. You, on the other hand?"

"I would truly enjoy insulting you and telling you that your ranch hands should doubt you, but that would be rather ridiculous of me.

“As we both know, you have only one ranch hand and that man is as foolish as you are for thinking you could ever live up to your father,” Thomas said, flashing that wicked smile of his as though he had just achieved some grand accomplishment.

“You really are a menace, aren’t you? I don’t know about you, Thomas, but I’m fairly certain I don’t have time for any more of this.

“I knew you were an awful man, but it turns out that you’re beyond that. You just can’t keep your eyes off my wife. If you want to attack my ranch, that’s fine.

“If you don’t like how I run things, that’s not my problem. But at least I know how to display genuine character. I’m not like you.

“I know how to be a decent man and that’s more than you can ever say,” Ray shot back.

“Character? You’re now accusing me of a poor display of character? Well, that is truly disheartening. I am curious to know what it is about my character that you find so shocking.

“What have I done?” Thomas asked, his false innocence masking the truth that Ray knew was behind it.

“You know exactly what you have done. You bought shoes for my Cynthia. You went out of your way to try and show me up, to make it look like I don’t know how to provide for her,” Ray accused.

“Me?” Thomas scoffed. He shook his head and kicked at some dirt that was stuck to one of his boots. It was clear that it was nothing to him, but that he didn’t want to be too much of a distraction.

Ray wished he could cover Thomas in dirt and leave him standing there, looking like a fool.

“Don’t deny it,” Ray said.

“What am I supposed to be denying? I fear I do not understand the charge against me,” Thomas said in that obnoxious, city-boy way he so often spoke.

Was it possible that it was the reason Thomas and Cynthia had bonded? Their love of the city? What if they really did have something?

No. Ray wasn't there to deal with his insecurities. He was there to handle Thomas and bring all this to an end. After all, Thomas was the one causing problems. No one else.

And if Ray was too caught up in feeling sorry for himself that he couldn't stop Thomas from doing anything more to get in the way, it would be a shameful thing.

“You understand perfectly well,” Ray replied, clearing his head of the other worries. “You know exactly what I'm talking about. I don't take kindly to having you come after my wife the way you did.

“I don't want to hear again about how you keep coming after her, trying to get her attention and convince her to what? To be with you? To leave me?”

“Why do you think your wife would leave you in order to be with me? That's a shocking and upsetting thing to consider. Is that really possible?” Thomas asked, keeping his expression blank.

“I never said she would leave me! You know exactly what I'm getting at.

“The fact of the matter is that you are doing everything in your power to undermine my marriage, to make a fool of me and my wife. I won't let you, Thomas.

“I won't stand by while you attempt to tear us down. Do you think you can go around, buying her shoes, and get away with it?” Ray asked, unable to keep his voice from rising.

“Why do you keep mentioning shoes?” Thomas asked, laughing in amusement. “It certainly appears that you are upset about this, but I really can’t understand why.

“I mean, your wife received a pair of shoes? What does this have to do with me?” he asked.

“You know exactly what it has to do with you. Why did you go and buy my wife a pair of shoes after you saw that I had just done so?” Ray asked.

He knew what he had seen and it didn’t seem worthwhile for Thomas to pretend otherwise, aside from the fact that Thomas was just trying as hard as he could to make Ray miserable.

Unfortunately, it was working.

“Well, this certainly is strange. No man has ever come to me accusing me of something as strange as purchasing shoes for his wife.

“Tell me, what makes you think I am the one responsible for this?” Thomas asked.

“Because I’m not the fool you think I am. I know it was you. I know exactly what kind of man you are,” Ray replied.

“It would seem that you do not. After all, it would cost a pretty penny to purchase a nice pair of shoes for a woman. Would I really be so bold as to do that for a woman who is already married?”

“Nothing would surprise me. Not from you. I know you want everything I have and more. You have an insatiable appetite for ruining things for others, especially for me.

“You think I want to live with this level of frustration? I don’t. I just want to have a happy life with the woman I married,” Ray insisted.

“Then why are you here?” Thomas asked.

“I’m here to tell you to stay away from her. That shouldn’t be so difficult. You know better than to get in between a man and his wife.

“I’m here to warn you that if you don’t get out of our way, I’ll make you pay for it,” Ray threatened.

“What are you going to do? Run around town telling people I bought shoes for your wife when I haven’t said or done anything to make you think it was me?” Thomas asked with a laugh.

He scratched at the back of his neck in a casual, disbelieving way that mocked Ray.

But Ray couldn’t believe it. He knew, without a doubt, that Thomas was the one who had bought the shoes.

And yet, here was Thomas, not admitting or denying, just trying to make Ray sound foolish for the accusation. It was a clever tactic, to be sure, but it was only making Ray angrier—which Ray suspected must be the goal.

“You and I both know it was you. Ever since Cynthia came to town, you have shown an interest in her.

“I am not going to let you come after my wife, trying to make her think you would be a better husband than I am,” Ray insisted.

“I find it strange that you are so insecure about your wife’s expectations. If you think she is likely to leave you, that is not my fault.

“If you expect that she would be more confident in my abilities as a husband, that is not my fault either,” Thomas said.

“I came here to warn you, not to be manipulated,” Ray said, having had enough of Thomas’s games.

“And I am telling you that, whatever your intention, it is not my fault

that you can't seem to keep your wife happy. And if you can't trust her, is it possible that maybe it is she—and not me—who has led you to believe she could want a different husband?" Thomas asked, acting deeply offended.

Ray was left speechless at that. He knew better than to let Thomas get to him like this, but there was no way to stop it. He couldn't help it.

How was Ray supposed to just let it go when Thomas was making all these claims that were truly injurious to his life with Cynthia?

"I don't know why I wasted my time in coming here. I ought to have known better than to trust that you would be honest with me," Ray said, his voice gravelly with bitterness.

"Honestly, I'm not sure why you came, either. It seems to me that these are things you should be speaking with your wife about. Not me.

"I have never seen a husband so determined to believe his wife unfaithful, and I find that truly upsetting. I'm sure that she would, as well," Thomas said, shaking his head in mock disappointment.

Ray was deeply ashamed, which he knew had been Thomas's goal. He had failed Cynthia, failed to take care of her and to trust her.

He had given her every reason to be upset with him, but Ray took comfort in the fact that she didn't know he had come here. At least she wasn't aware his trust had fallen to this extent.

Still, he had hurt her feelings and, in his anger, had come after Thomas, as well.

Despite knowing he was right about Thomas, Ray couldn't believe he had fallen right into this trap, getting himself into some real trouble and making everything worse than it already was.

"I've had enough of this. Just stay away from her," Ray said, turning and leaving Thomas behind.

He could feel his enemy's eyes following him and knew there was an ugly smirk, proud and venomous, on Thomas's face.

But Ray kept walking. He needed to get back home and find Cynthia.

It was time to apologize to her, to admit his own foolish behavior and the fact that he had been wrong to accuse her of anything when it was clearly Thomas who was at fault.

He hoped she would forgive him, but he also hoped he could let go of that lingering question posed by Thomas.

If Ray couldn't trust his wife, was it possible that she might want a different husband?

Cynthia had walked into town to distract herself and get her mind off how Ray had just treated her. The last thing she needed to deal with was her jealous husband going wild and accusing her of having feelings for another man.

Until Ray calmed down, she just wanted to be away from the ranch.

It still hurt, knowing that Ray didn't believe her. She hadn't done anything to cause that kind of lack of trust. She certainly hadn't given him a reason to doubt her or to think she couldn't be trusted.

If anything, Cynthia thought she had been a good wife, committed to the man she had married. She couldn't understand why Ray would think anything different.

From the beginning, it had been clear that his rivalry with Thomas was a problem. Nevertheless, she hadn't thought it would be so extreme that he would respond with such a bitter fury.

Then again, Cynthia also hadn't anticipated that Thomas would be bold and rude enough to try and make Ray feel inferior.

There was something about these men that left Cynthia wondering if she had made a mistake in coming or if she was the problem.

Could she accept blame for their uninhibited need to be better than one another?

None of this was her fault. She was sure of that. And yet, she was the one at the center of it all—and that, somehow, made it all that much worse.

She sighed, wandering through the general store, trying to let go of her worries. The shop was full of trinkets and tools, food products and other less useful items.

Cynthia wanted to waste time, but she also felt somewhat burdened by how crowded it was in there and how much she needed air.

“You all right, Miss Cynthia?” the man who ran the shop asked.

“Hmm? Oh, yes, thank you. I am perfectly all right. Just a bit tired,” she said.

“Looks like you need a handkerchief. You been crying?”

She brushed at her eyes, wondering if they were red and bloodshot or what else might have given away her emotions. Did she simply look sad?

“No, no,” she said.

But the man looked at her with concern and he handed her a brand new, embroidered handkerchief, anyway.

“I don’t think I have enough money with me for something this fine,” she said.

“You don’t need no money for that right now. You just go on and take it. And if there’s anything you need some help finding, you can let me know,” he said.

“Thank you,” she replied, humbled by his generosity. “I suppose there is a part of me that really does need it.”

“We all do sometimes. Life isn’t always easy, but that doesn’t mean we

stop living it. You just be strong now, you hear me?

“I’m sure you can do this and get along nicely. You married a fella who will take good care of you and that’s half the battle,” he said with a kind laugh.

“Well... only half,” Cynthia replied, sadly, trying to smile so she didn’t cave to her misery in front of him as she continued looking around.

Anita had mentioned that she had lost a crop of one of her favorite bush beans the previous year and was out of seeds. Cynthia found some in the general store, planning to take them to Anita so they could plant them.

After finishing up, Cynthia left the shop and sighed, trying to decide where she would go next until she was ready to make the hour-long walk back to the house.

But when she exited, she saw Thomas up ahead, getting into his buckboard and heading out of town, back toward his ranch.

Thomas lived closer to town than Cynthia did and she knew she could get there in twenty to thirty minutes. If she didn’t go now, she might lose her nerve.

She would be too scared to confront him. There was no point in dawdling when she knew she could get to him and confront him about the shoes.

Determined and filled with anger to give her strength, Cynthia walked at a quickened pace, unwilling to waste even a moment in her quest to reach that man and give him a piece of her mind.

She managed to get to his house faster than she expected and quickly made her way up the porch, knocking on the door the moment she reached it.

The door swung open and a look of surprise crossed his face. It was

quickly replaced with satisfaction.

“Well, well, well. I have to say that this is unexpected.

“There was a part of me that wondered if you would ever finally come here, but it would seem that you are finally ready to make the right choice,” he said.

“You think I’m here to actually be with you?” Cynthia scoffed.

“Please, dear Cynthia, don’t play games with me. I know your husband hasn’t been a good man lately.

“I have heard that he has his doubts about you and I’m terribly sorry that you are having to go through that. Still, I think it could be a sign, don’t you?

“Maybe this is how it was always meant to come together,” he said.

Cynthia stared at him in disbelief for a long moment. She could hardly comprehend what he was trying to say or the fact that he really thought she had come because she was leaving Ray.

It was inexplicable that this man deemed himself worthy of her affection with such blatant arrogance.

“There is nothing wrong with my husband, and I haven’t come here to give you anything but a piece of my mind,” Cynthia hissed, leaning forward with narrowed eyes and a pointed finger.

All the hurt and anger she had welling up inside of her was ready to burst out. Not only that, but she’d endured so many accusations and rude comments from Ray that she felt like echoing those furious sentiments now and letting Thomas feel the weight of the burden.

“Oh, dear,” he said, putting a hand to his chest in the same display of false innocence she had already seen from him. If he was going to put on this kind of show, she was going to keep pushing.

Thomas had no shame. That much was clear. He didn't seem to mind whether they knew the truth or not.

At one moment, he was happy to deny his faults and the next, he seemed almost to take pleasure in their knowing. He was a dreadfully confusing man who swayed with the tides of people's emotions, and that only angered Cynthia further.

She couldn't understand how someone could be so callous.

"You know what you did," she said through clenched teeth.

She was furious with Thomas for acting like this, for behaving as though he hadn't done anything wrong and that she was making foolish accusations against him.

She wondered if he had always been this manipulative or if something had happened in his life to make him this way.

"Actually, I only know that your husband came here accusing me of something about shoes. It was strange because he didn't seem to trust you very much, thinking you might leave him to be with me if I had purchased these fine shoes for you.

"I asked him why he was so sure that you were disloyal to him, but he only got angrier with me," Thomas said.

Cynthia was shocked and knew her face betrayed her. But that was not the only betrayal she felt.

How could Ray have done this? How could he have come to Thomas and said those things?

He really didn't trust her at all? He actually thought she would leave him and come here to be with Thomas?

It had been one thing for Ray to go as far as accusing her, but if he had even come here again, actually thinking she could be swayed by a

pair of shoes, Ray really didn't know her at all.

He was believing a horde of lies that made no sense and were only weighing on both their shoulders.

"You didn't know he came here, did you?" Thomas asked.

"Of course I didn't," she snapped back. "And just as he must have told you, I am going to tell you. There has been enough of this.

"I don't want anything to do with you and I want you to stop trying to ruin our lives."

"I have done nothing to warrant this!" Thomas exclaimed in earnest. "Yes. I confess to you that I sent you the loveliest shoes I have seen, but only because I thought you deserving of them."

"You finally admit it?" Cynthia asked.

"Only because I want you to know that I am just trying to be here for you. It is not my intention to harm you, but to be your ally.

"I know what kind of a man Ray is and I don't trust him to take care of you. Look how miserable he has already made you!" Thomas insisted.

"It is *you* who is making me miserable. You're the one who won't leave us alone. You're the reason Ray has doubts about my loyalty," she said.

"You cannot possibly blame me for the fact that your husband believes you to be unfaithful to him. Perhaps it is you who gave him doubts.

"Have you told him about me? Did you tell him that I care for you?" Thomas asked.

Cynthia froze, not liking the question. The truth was, no matter how she answered, Thomas would misconstrue it.

If she told him that she had confessed all of his advances to Ray, it would appear that she was trying to make Ray jealous. But if she told Thomas the truth...

"Ah, I see," Thomas said, tutting and shaking his head. "You chose not to tell him. I must admit that it seems a bit strange to me.

"After all, he is your husband and if you are genuinely concerned that he might get the wrong idea... well, now it looks as though you were trying to hide something from him and I cannot imagine he is happy about that."

"You have no idea what you're saying, Thomas," she said, despite the fact that he was right.

If Ray found out now that she had been hiding conversations with Thomas all this time, he would be furious. He would only be more convinced of her disloyalty.

Ray would think she had hidden it out of suspicious motives, as opposed to the truth that she was simply worried about his response.

"I think I do," Thomas replied. His love of this drama was appalling and he didn't seem to be the least bit embarrassed by his responses to her.

No matter what, he was perfectly fine with his shameful actions and Cynthia was certain that she could never bear to be around a man like this again for as long as she lived.

He leaned forward just slightly, with a glint of amusement in his eye. He really was enjoying this, enjoying how she suffered through his arguments.

Cynthia sighed, realizing she was having no luck at all. Thomas was so frustrating! How could she reason with him?

"Leave me alone or I will make sure that no one in town ever trusts

you again!" Cynthia shouted.

With that, she turned away from Thomas, walking quickly away, convinced that she would never have to face him again.

But when Thomas took her by the hand and pulled her back toward him, Cynthia was shocked. The gesture was one so familiar, so forward, that she could hardly believe it.

Frozen in place and unsure what to do, Cynthia stood still, blinking away her surprise.

This motion, as inappropriate as it was, held more passion and affection for Cynthia than Ray had ever shown her. Thomas truly seemed desperate for Cynthia.

How could she make him realize she didn't want him? How could she get him to stop this? What sort of man was he that he would be improper in even how he took her hand?

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked him, breathlessly. It had taken her such a long time to find words that she was almost startled by the sudden noise.

"I can't let you go, Cynthia. I just want to take care of you. Is that really so wrong?" he asked.

"Yes!" she insisted, feeling his grip on her wrist and suddenly remembering that she needed to pull away.

"Please, don't go," he said.

"Let go of me!" she yelled.

"Not until you tell me the truth," he said.

"The truth about what?" she asked, not even bothering to struggle against his strength anymore.

It wasn't worth it when she sensed he truly wouldn't let her go until she gave him an answer to whatever his question was.

"The truth about why you didn't tell Ray. About me. About the times I have come to you," he said. "Is it because you didn't want him to be upset?"

"Or is it because you knew, deep in your heart, that you wanted to have the option? You wanted to be able to come to me if you needed to."

"I cannot even begin to tell you how wrong you are," Cynthia said, looking him in the eye. "You are the most foolish, unbelievable man I have ever met.

"Your arrogance disgusts me and I would never leave my husband. Especially not for you."

"One day, you will," Thomas said, a promise in his voice. "One day, you will realize I am the only one you have."

With those words, Thomas looked beyond Cynthia and his expression shifted. His lips parted as if caught and he dropped Cynthia's hand.

She turned and saw the last sight in the world she wanted to in that moment.

Ray was there. Just far enough to have seen them without hearing a word of their conversation.

Cynthia watched as he kicked the flank of his horse and pulled the reins to ride off toward the house. It was clear that he had gotten the wrong impression after all, that he thought Cynthia had been there for another reason altogether.

Unable to control herself, Cynthia began to run, calling after him in desperation.

“Ray!” she cried, knowing she wasn’t fast enough to catch him. But she couldn’t let him think that she had betrayed him. It was too awful.

There was only one thing Cynthia could do, and that was to chase after Ray and convince him of her love.

Ray had only been home from confronting Thomas a short time when he looked out the window and saw one of Thomas's men riding off. He'd rushed out the front door to find a letter.

Wondering what it was about, he'd opened it, expecting some kind of nonsensical, faux attempt at making Ray think he was the problem or a straightforward denial of wrongdoing.

After all, that was what Thomas was best at.

Instead, Ray read the letter to find something else entirely. Rather than a denial, it was a prideful confession. Then again, wasn't that Thomas's other skill?

Wasn't he also full of eagerness when it came to sharing his own accomplishments? And didn't he find even dishonorable things like this to be an accomplishment?

Ray,

I suppose there is no point in denying it anymore. I know you just left here and I could have told you then, but it was much more fun to watch you walk away in defeat.

The truth is, you know I bought those shoes for Cynthia. And I wanted you to know.

It is much more fun watching you get jealous about her than it was making

sure I had a better, more successful ranch than yours.

Honestly, you should know by now that I have no intention of stopping this. I like your girl and I do not think you deserve her.

It has become clear to me that I would be a better husband for her. And if not a husband, at least the fella who keeps her warm at night.

This is why I want you to know that I am not finished yet. I will not stop until she is mine. It will happen soon, of course. You ought to know that.

She is so close to leaving you and coming to be here, with me. You might as well give up trying to convince her to stay there with you when we both know that she would even be better off here.

Think about it. Who can make her happy? Who can provide for her? Who is more successful, handsome, charming? We both know the answers.

So, good luck, if you intend to keep fighting. But it would be better if you just give up. She will be mine soon enough.

Thomas

Ray had been in shock at first, but he quickly got over it. After all, lingering on this was useless.

There were more important things to do now and he had to move forward if he was going to push against the appalling lack of character he saw from Thomas.

So, Ray had chosen to ride.

It was time to come back and finish his business with Thomas. But then, when Ray had nearly arrived, he saw them. There she was. Cynthia, with Thomas.

He had been holding her hand and she had been so close to him, looking up at him. Had there been admiration in her eyes? Her back

was to Ray and he couldn't tell.

But there was no reason to doubt as much. After all, she could have gotten away. And why was she there to begin with?

He stayed there for a long while, just watching. Maybe it wasn't all that long, after all, but it felt like an eternity to Ray.

The way Thomas spoke with such fire and passion, the way Cynthia just stayed there with him, not moving or trying to escape his grasp.

They were together. After everything, after all the denials and the false hope, it was true. Cynthia had come to Thomas after Ray accused her.

Had she always wanted to be with him? Or had Ray driven her there? Was it his fault? Did he send her straight into Thomas's arms?

He didn't have to wait long for something to shift. Thomas looked up and spotted him and Ray was stiff for a moment, not knowing what to do.

He wanted to charge forward, but felt it would only make him a cuckolded fool. After all, Cynthia had made her choice. Why should he go after her any longer? Why should he beg?

But when Cynthia turned and saw Ray, she called after him and started to run toward him. She raced in his direction but all he could see was Thomas standing there, his arms crossed.

He was just far enough that Ray couldn't quite make out his expression, but Ray knew it was that haughty smirk.

"Wait! Ray! Let me explain!" Cynthia called to him.

But he had no intention of waiting or letting her try to explain. He looked away, still trying to decide what to do.

“Ray! Please wait! It’s not what you think!” she continued.

He couldn’t stand to remain there and listen to her excuses or explanations. He knew what he had seen and it was too much. There was no reason to stay, not anymore.

After all, she had every reason to leave him—and now, he had every reason to leave her.

“Ray!”

But he gently tugged the reins and then took off.

How could she do this to him? How could she leave him like this for the man she knew he hated? And why didn’t Cynthia have the courtesy to be honest with him?

She could have told Ray that she didn’t love him, that she would rather be with Thomas. But instead of telling him the truth, she’d let him believe a lie. He was a complete fool.

It was all so clear to Ray now. He had lost his wife a long time ago, but he had been too stubborn to realize or accept it.

Now, despite everything he hoped for, it was too late. She was gone.

He had ruined it all and couldn’t fix it. Not only that, but he’d lost it to the man he despised most.

Ray tried with all his might to direct his anger solely at Thomas, but realized he simply couldn’t help but rage at the betrayal by his wife.

How could she do this to him? How could she be so blatantly unfaithful?

It was impossible to let it go and Ray wondered if he would ever be able to forgive Cynthia.

Moreover, would he now spend the rest of his days mourning the loss of her to this terrible man who did everything within his power to destroy the happiness Ray had? It seemed that way.

Ray tried to fight the shadow of failure that hung above him, but there was nothing more he could do to escape it.

“Ray! Ray!”

Her cries were loud, even beyond the racing of his horse’s hooves, but it only made Ray ride faster. He wasn’t going to stay there.

“Wait!”

The word was long, drawn out like a cry of pain. But the only pain Ray knew was the one stabbing in his chest, reminding him that he was a failure.

He couldn’t bear it any longer and the moment he arrived back at the ranch, Ray decided to keep on riding. He couldn’t slow, couldn’t face his mother or Mark to tell them what had happened.

He would have to come back sooner or later, sure, but not now. Maybe in a few hours, if he had cooled off by then.

As he raced through the plains, his horse kicking up dust that he knew would be mud again come winter time, Ray questioned every decision he had made since the death of his father.

He wished he hadn’t worked so hard, killing himself only to still come out as a failure. He wished that he had never agreed to the bed rest, that he had never ended up writing to Cynthia.

He even wished that he had never turned bitter against Thomas all those years ago when he came to town to take over the family ranch.

If Ray had just kept his temper and refrained from getting jealous, none of this would have happened. He wouldn’t have let pride get the

best of him.

Sure, he had every reason to detest Thomas, but the excuses meant nothing when, at the end of the day, Ray's misery was stronger than his pride could ever be.

“**R**ay, Ray, Ray, no, no!” Cynthia cried, collapsed on her knees with her tear-streaked face buried in her hands.

The name was an empty echo on her lips, but she would not stop calling it nonetheless. How could she give up? Even if Ray didn’t trust her anymore, even if he never had, how could she let go?

Cynthia just wanted her husband back.

“Ray...” she whimpered, the sound dying on her lips.

She knew Ray couldn’t hear her. He was long gone by now. But she couldn’t stop crying. It was much too difficult to let him go.

How could he have abandoned her? Why wouldn’t he at least give her a chance to explain?

The heat of the day pricked at Cynthia’s skin, beading sweat down her back that faced the sun against her shattered form.

She was broken, beaten down by the distrust from her husband and the forward advances of Thomas. None of it had been her fault... at least, not until she came to confront Thomas without telling Ray.

It had been nonsense for her to try and hide it all from Ray. He knew Thomas liked her and was trying to get her attention. And yet, she had tried to pretend that nothing was amiss.

She had ignored the reality that she was being sought after by another man and it had only ended up hurting Ray.

“Cynthia?” Thomas said, gently, standing behind her. “Cynthia, I know you’re upset, but I’m here.”

“Leave me alone!” she screamed. “Will you just leave me alone? You did this!”

“I didn’t mean to—”

“Of course you did!” she shouted, spinning on her knees and standing up in a quick motion. She faced Thomas with heat boiling under her skin.

“You did this! I care about my husband. I want a good future with him! I want peace between us, but you keep doing everything you can to manipulate and ruin our happiness and it’s working!”

“That isn’t really my fault,” he said with a nervous laugh. “I don’t know what you think this is, but Ray is the one who caused all of this. Not me.

“All right? When you think about whose fault it is, it isn’t mine.”

“Of course it is! He won’t listen to me now and he has abandoned me here with you. Can’t you see that it’s your fault? Are you so incapable of taking responsibility?

“And you call yourself a man? You think this is how men behave? It’s not! Men don’t use people’s emotions against them. They don’t twist situations for their own benefit,” she said, angrily.

Cynthia stormed toward the stable, determined to ride after Ray. She needed to get to him quickly and worried that she had already waited too long, spending her time in mourning rather than chasing after the man she loved.

“Where are you going?” Thomas asked her, his voice nervous with the question.

He sped up and kept at her rapid pace before walking backward while facing her, his hands held up as if to slow her down.

“You caused these problems, so you’re going to let me borrow a horse. I’ll bring it back; I don’t want anything that belongs to you.

“But in the meantime, you’re going to let me take one,” she muttered. It was really the least he could do after all of this.

“Wait, wait, wait,” he said in quick succession. “You stay right here. I will go and saddle one up, just for you. I’ll pick out my sweetest mare.

“You will be perfectly happy to ride her. I don’t want you accidentally picking one of my buckers.”

Cynthia glared at Thomas, suspicious that he was suddenly so eager to help her. But she finally shrugged and looked off into the distance, toward the ranch where she figured Ray was back home, probably saying all kinds of things about her to Anita and Mark.

She wondered if they would believe him before she had a chance to explain.

She looked back at Thomas and gave him a shrug of approval, letting him choose a horse for her.

She needed one that would be fast, but he was right. She wasn’t an expert rider and she couldn’t handle one of the rowdier ones.

“I’ll just be a moment,” Thomas said, rushing away from her. She heard him pause and she glanced over to see why. He was staring at her as if he wanted to say something more.

“What is it?” she asked in irritation.

“Just... just stay right there, all right? Don’t you go wandering. The last thing we want is for Ray to come back by again and think you know your way around this place,” he said.

She watched Thomas turn and head toward the stable, wondering why he was acting so strange all of a sudden. Something about her need for a horse clearly bothered him.

He didn’t want her by the stables. Why not? Why wouldn’t he let her go there?

The moment he was inside, Cynthia gave in to her curiosity. On light feet, she quickly scampered closer.

Squinting for a better look while keeping her distance, she couldn’t see anything unusual. But as she got closer, she heard some strange noises—not from the stable, but from the barn just beyond.

It was a risk, trying to get a good look at what was going on in there.

Thomas might come out before he finished saddling up the horse, not that it would take very long. And he would see that she was gone or that she had decided to investigate the barn.

If he was upset with her, he might do something rash. After all, he clearly wasn’t the most level-headed man in the world, and she knew he was unlikely to ever see much reason.

Yes, it was a dangerous thing she was about to do, snooping about his barn.

Nevertheless, Cynthia had to do it. She needed to understand what was going on with this man and why he was so determined to keep her away.

Sliding against the outer wall of the stable and taking a couple steps toward the barn while trying to keep out of the way of any openings where Thomas might see her, Cynthia crouched low.

She tried to creep closer, but quickly realized she didn't have to. She could see plenty from where she was.

There was a sliding opening to the barn, a little space where the ranch hands could pass things from outside to inside without coming all the way into the building. And when Cynthia got close enough to peer through it, she saw a few dozen cattle, cooped up and angry.

More importantly, she saw at least a few cattle with the brand Ray used.

Cynthia gasped and took a few steps back. She couldn't let Thomas catch her, so she took one more glance to confirm her suspicions.

Yes. She was right. And she saw not only Ray's brand, but two others.

Certain that she had figured it out, Cynthia quickly and quietly ran back to where Thomas had told her to stand. He seemed to still be busy and she was hopeful he hadn't noticed her absence.

This was huge! She couldn't wait to find Ray and tell him. Thomas had been stealing his cattle, and also a few from other ranches!

And his own land had multiple barn structures, scattered beyond his house. There could have been hundreds more beasts that he was keeping cruelly stuck inside like this!

"I've got her!" Thomas said, coming out of the stable with a smile on his face, leading a pretty paint mare toward Cynthia.

She looked at the horse for a long moment, worried that Thomas was trying to trick her, that he might actually be giving her one of the more wild from his horses. But the mare appeared to be as calm as he had claimed.

Cynthia had to behave as though she trusted him and put a faint smile on her face. She couldn't give it away by being too friendly.

He knew she was mad at him, but it took her a moment to remember exactly how she had behaved before learning this dramatic news.

At last, she was able to find her anger and cynicism once more and glared at Thomas again.

Once she had recovered the attitude, she was ready to move on and ride—all the while trying to come up with a plan as to how she could remedy the matter with Ray and catch Thomas for his crimes.

“Good. I’d say this is the least you could do for me, don’t you think?” she snapped at him.

“I think what I *should* be doing is asking you to stay here and be my wife, but you don’t appear to be all that interested in such an arrangement,” he replied.

“I’m glad you finally realize that. You know, it wouldn’t have done either of us any good if you were still trying to get me to leave Ray for you,” she said, taking the reins and comfortingly petting the mare’s neck, just to be sure the horse really was as docile as she appeared to be.

Convinced, Cynthia mounted and took off, without another word to Thomas. She needed to get to Ray as quickly as possible. He was probably at the ranch by now and she needed to find him.

She hadn’t been married to Ray for long, nor had she lived a ranch life for much time at all, but she knew it was unusual to keep cattle in a barn like that.

There was only one reason she could think of to explain why Thomas would do that. One reason why any rancher would subject their cattle to a close-quartered life.

To hide them.

Cynthia didn’t know about the other brandings, but she knew that

some of those cattle belonged to Ray, and he would never have sold them to Thomas. Not for any amount.

It was clear what had happened. The rustlings. The growth of Thomas's ranch.

He was stealing cattle from other ranchers in town, and must have especially sought out Ray's herd. It was a perfect idea.

Thomas would manage to boost his own worth, probably selling to people in the city where he had come from, a place where no one would recognize whose brand belonged to whom.

Meanwhile, he would be causing Ray the frustration and devastation of losing some of his own herd. He would be angry and feel like a failure. All the things that Thomas wanted.

It was right there for him to reach out and take. He could see Ray's hope dwindling, see how he was losing confidence.

And all the while, Thomas could strut through town with everyone thinking he was the best rancher in the area.

"I'll be here for you, Cynthia!" Thomas called after her. "When Ray refuses to take you in, I will be here!"

"I know you will," Cynthia muttered as she rode at a gallop. "You'll be there, waiting. Not because you care about me. Not because you like me at all. But because you want to see Ray brought down."

"Because you want him depressed, embarrassed, and you want him to fail. Well, I'm not going to let that happen."

She kicked the flank and the mare sped faster. Thankful for the lessons from Anita and the few she had received from Ray, Cynthia tried to ride confidently, despite the fact that she still felt like a novice.

Yet, it was her desperation to see Ray that motivated her, to apologize

for not telling him what was going on and to tell him about the cattle she'd seen.

And while she hoped he would apologize in turn for his neglect and for not trusting her, Cynthia was willing to fight for her marriage even if she was the only one.

There was a part of her that said it was weak. The hurt and bitter part that had been abandoned time and time again mocked her for being so willing to put forth the effort to be with Ray.

But something deep inside Cynthia understood Ray. She understood the desperation to prove himself and she understood that he was a little bit naive in how to express affection.

But she sensed that he cared for her. He cared for her in the way a young man started to love for the first time, still anxious and worried, trying to prove himself to the woman he was falling for.

It seemed like Ray was just trying to be a good provider, a good husband and son. And she wanted to give him a chance, at least.

Cynthia wanted to know for certain that the Ray she saw underneath it all was really the Ray she had married.

She could finally see the ranch in the distance. As she approached, Cynthia smiled to herself.

Perhaps the only part better than proving that she was falling in love with her husband was the realization that she was going to show everyone what an awful man Thomas was.

Soon enough, they would know he was a thief. They would know he was a liar.

And everyone, Ray included, would know that Cynthia had never planned to leave her husband for him.

Sure, Ray didn't trust her right now, but that didn't mean he wouldn't.

If she could just get him to listen long enough to tell him about the cattle in the barn, she trusted she would make him understand. He had to understand.

Ray couldn't abandon her then. Not if she saved his ranch.

Hurt and angry, Ray shook his head and thrust the shovel to the ground, wishing he hadn't turned his horse back. He'd thought working would be a better, more productive distraction from his sadness, but so far, it wasn't helping.

He truly had begun to fall in love with Cynthia, even if he had no idea how to express it. He wanted her to love him in return. But it was too late for that now.

She had made her choice and she'd chosen that awful, awful man. The one who took *everything* from Ray.

The one who had ruined him and clearly wasn't planning to stop now.

Ray heard the sound of hooves racing toward the house, just a few yards to his right, and he looked up. His jaw dropped when he saw that it was Cynthia, riding up with desperation in her eyes.

At first, he was just shocked that she had decided to come back here. Now? What was wrong with her? Surely she knew he needed more time before he was ready to speak with her.

But then, as Ray considered it, he was angry for another reason entirely.

What had taken her so long? It had been at least forty-five minutes—maybe an hour—since he saw her at Thomas's home. The ride wouldn't have been more than twenty minutes.

What was she doing with Thomas the rest of that time? Hatching a plan to string Ray's emotions along a little bit further? Mocking him for being so upset about her leaving him?

It could have been just about anything.

But when Cynthia tugged on the reins and stopped the horse, dismounting quickly, she rushed to Ray.

"Ray, you have to listen to me, please!" she begged.

"I don't want to hear it, Cynthia," he replied, trying to stop himself from getting emotional.

It seemed the only thing he could do was hold onto his anger. Otherwise, he feared, he was just going to give in, that he would beg her to forget about Thomas and come home.

But how could he do that? He was angry and hurt and didn't understand.

He had failed as a husband—it was all his fault, and she had no reason to give him another chance. Besides, it was easier to be angry than to accept that much of this was because of his own actions.

"Please, Ray! This is important. It's about Thomas," she said.

"That's the last thing I want to hear about," he said, spinning to face her and succumbing to his grief.

"I know that, but it's very important and I promise you will be happy once I have told you everything that happened," she said.

"Just leave me alone. You made it clear that you don't want to be here with me as my wife. You care more about Thomas and his fancy ranch.

"Well, fine. Go and be with him. I'm not stopping you," Ray said.

Cynthia groaned and pressed a hand to her temple before straightening her back again and trying to get his attention.

“Will you listen to me, Ray? This is important! Not only are you wrong about my feelings, but I think I’ve solved the mystery!” she exclaimed.

“I told you that I don’t want to hear anything about you and Thomas! Don’t you understand? I’ve had enough!” Ray shouted, not looking at her and focusing on his work.

He truly had begun to love Cynthia and the last thing he wanted to do was hurt her in return. He had caused her enough pain.

But with everything that happened, seeing her there with Thomas and knowing that she had spent time with him, that she probably cared for him, it was too much.

How could he listen to a word from Cynthia’s lips?

“But you *do* want to hear this. You need to, Ray. You are going to be so happy, I promise you,” she said.

Ray opened his mouth to refute her point, to scream at her, to do whatever it would take to get her to leave him alone.

But he couldn’t. Not anymore. If she was this insistent, it really did have to be important. Not only that, but he was feeling guilty that he hadn’t given her a chance to explain.

It was wrong of him. He should have allowed her the chance to share what was going on and how he might have misunderstood. The fact that he hadn’t was truly awful.

He wanted to hear whatever was on her mind, whatever she had to say. Despite himself, he couldn’t pull away or fight against her. Now that she was standing before him, he couldn’t resist her.

“Cynthia, I don’t know why you came here to torment me, but if it’s so important to you then fine. I’m listening. Say whatever it is that you have to say,” he told her.

“Thank you, Ray. Thank you so much. I promise you won’t regret it. You see, you’ve got everything all wrong,” she insisted.

Ray scoffed and shook his head in frustration, unable to look at her.

“You’ve got that right. It seems I have done everything wrong from the beginning of all this,” he said.

“No! That’s not what I mean,” she shouted, stomping a foot in irritation. “Why are you making this so much more difficult than it is?”

“Honestly, I have seen plenty of women argue like this, but you are the first man I’ve heard with these kinds of arguments, twisting my words to mean something completely different. I wish you would just hear me out.”

Ray paused and looked her up and down, seeing the determination that he had grown to appreciate from her. Maybe he really was being unfair.

It wouldn’t be the first time he had made a mistake in how he treated Cynthia.

“I’m sorry. Go on,” he said.

“Thank you,” she replied. “Now, I need you to listen to me because there are two parts to this.

“The first one, I can only hope you believe. The second is something that is going to make you very happy.”

Curious, he listened patiently, hoping she had a convincing reason for being with Thomas that day. If she didn’t, he was sure he would be crushed for the rest of his days and would never be able to trust

another woman for as long as he lived.

“As far as Thomas goes, I can’t stand him. He had been after me, you’re right about that, but I never gave him a reason to have hope.

“I told you the first couple times he spoke to me, but I saw how angry you were and I was worried you might do something that would get you in trouble. Because of that, I stopped telling you whenever he would talk to me,” she said, looking down in shame.

“Maybe I was wrong to do that, but I really thought I was protecting you. Now, I’m just embarrassed. You don’t trust me because I didn’t tell you everything. Well, here’s everything.

“Thomas kept trying to convince me to leave you and I kept saying no. I don’t want to be with him, Ray. I never did.

“I wanted to be your wife, and I still want that,” Cynthia told him with devotion in her eyes as she looked up.

“But you went to him,” Ray said.

“To tell him, once and for all, that I never want to hear another word from him. He just kept trying, even when I was really insistent. I didn’t know what else to do.

“Nothing I said seemed to work and I was afraid he would never leave me alone. I thought I had no choice but to go there and beg,” she said.

“And what did he say?” Ray asked.

“He refused again. He said he wanted to take care of me and all that. No matter what I did, no matter how I tried to fight, he wasn’t willing to just leave me alone.

“I have never met someone so manipulative, but he clearly...” Cynthia trailed off and swallowed, once more looking away from Ray as though she was embarrassed by something.

“What is it?” he asked, his voice softening.

“He clearly saw that I fear abandonment. He could tell that I’m afraid of being sent away or forgotten or neglected,” she said.

Ray understood what was underneath her anxiety in confessing this. It was because she thought he was neglecting her, that he was ignoring her.

She didn’t seem to want to come out and accuse him of it, but she didn’t have to say anything. He could tell what was in her heart and it made his own heart ache to know that she felt this way.

“You mean... you thought I would abandon you, and he could tell you were afraid of it... but I couldn’t? I didn’t even notice.

“Instead, I only made your fear come true,” he said, putting the pieces together.

Cynthia took a deep breath, neither confirming nor denying the point. She obviously didn’t want to make things worse between them, but Ray could tell he had hurt her beyond his reckoning.

“Cynthia, I am so sorry,” he said.

“It’s all right,” she replied, trying to brush it away. “It’s just that I didn’t want you to get the wrong idea so I never said anything about Thomas and then, well, he managed to ruin things, anyway.

“I’ve been abandoned before and I didn’t want to risk it again. I think there was a part of him that knew it and he took advantage of that.”

Ray felt awful all over again, angry at himself for making her feel like he might abandon her. He’d never even considered it.

Except that, without even thinking about it, he had left her with Thomas that day.

Instead of listening to her, he *had* abandoned her. He made an assumption that she was leaving him and he'd left her first.

"I am such a fool," he said, more to himself than to Cynthia. Ray smacked his forehead with the flattened palm of his hand, wishing he had just given her a moment to explain before he took off.

"No, it's all right. It actually turned out to be a good thing, Ray," she said.

"Good? How could it be good? I left you, Cynthia.

"You wanted to explain but I rode off without giving you a chance. I did the very thing you feared and you have no reason to forgive me for it," he said.

"I think it has become clear that you and I will spend a good amount of time learning how to communicate with one another, but we can only do that if you are willing to put that time in," she said.

Ashamed that he hadn't, Ray let out a tense exhale and thought back to the many times he had said he would devote more time to his wife. How often had he followed through on it?

How often had she been waiting for him to really act like a husband and get to know her?

"I will. For real this time. And I'm sorry I didn't believe you, Cynthia. I feel like such a fool and I know that I have been one. I made a terrible mistake, letting you suffer that way," he said.

"It's all right, Ray. I know you didn't mean to hurt me. It was all a misunderstanding and I think we can move on. It will take a lot of time, though, and we don't have much time just now," she said.

"But we should! We need to take the time, right? Isn't that what you want?"

“I have been awful, not giving you the attention that you really need,” he said, finally understanding that this was the very thing she’d been asking for all along.

And maybe, if he had paid attention to her sooner, they could have avoided these arguments and misunderstandings. They could have communicated better and been there for each other.

“We will talk about that more, but I told you I have other news, as well. And this is very important, Ray. You are going to be happy, but it’s still going to require some effort from us,” Cynthia said.

She took his hand and led him to the house and up the porch to the wooden chairs that looked out over the prairie and the town in the distance. Ray loved sitting out here, but it was much better with Cynthia beside him.

She gave him a sense of calm, now that he was seeing the world more clearly. Without the pain of betrayal, he could finally have a bit of peace and contentment.

That was something he’d been missing out on for quite some time before this.

“All right, now I need you to listen closely. This is important,” she said again, as though frightened that Ray might start getting angry again.

He could tell she was both worried and excited by whatever it was she had to share with him.

“Just tell me, Cynthia. You’re making me nervous,” he said.

“I told Thomas I needed to come and find you and that I was going to take one of his horses. He got a bit strange then and offered to saddle her up for me.

“It was obvious that he didn’t want me going near the stable, but I couldn’t tell why. It made no sense,” she said.

That was curious, indeed. Why would Thomas try to keep Cynthia away from the horses? Did he think she might get hurt? Or did he think she was going to try and steal them?

No, that wouldn't be a concern for Thomas. But there had to be a reason.

"What is it? Why was he acting that way?" Ray asked.

"Because of what I saw when he was busy with the horses," she replied with a mischievous grin on her face.

Ray leaned forward in anticipation. Whatever it was, he could tell that she was going to share something that would get Thomas into trouble and that would be a perfect ending to this otherwise dreadful day.

And based on Cynthia's attitude, she was just as happy to bring Thomas down as Ray was. It was only further confirmation that she really didn't like him and had never wanted him in her life.

"I could tell he was being sneaky, so I decided to do the same. When he was in the stable, I drew nearer and it wasn't long before I heard something.

"It wasn't coming from the stable, though, it was coming from the barn just beyond. So, I quickly made my way over and tried to have a look. Oh, Ray, you won't believe it!

"When I looked inside, I saw them. Your cattle! And not just yours, but other brands, as well.

"I don't know exactly how many he had crammed in there, but he has other barns across all that acreage. I'm sure he's keeping more cattle around and that's why part of your herd has gone missing," she said.

Ray stared in shock and disbelief. Was it possible? Could Thomas really be behind it all and, if so, what was his plan? And who else had he stolen from?

“But what can he do with them? Everyone in town knows how we each brand our cattle. I mean, sure, if he processes the meat, he can pass it along.

“But the meat won’t be any good if it’s not getting exercise and eating the fresh grass every day. No one would buy from him again. It would ruin his reputation,” Ray said.

“I don’t think he’s planning to keep them in there that long. Think about it, Ray. He has so many contacts in the city. No one there is going to know the difference between your brand and his.

“He can just take the meat all that way without worrying about it,” Cynthia said.

“Of course! Oh, that awful man! I knew he had to be up to something else, but I didn’t know what. And now, here he is, trying to ruin everything for me all over again.

“Selling my cattle off as meat? No. He won’t get away with this,” Ray said.

“He can’t,” she agreed. “Thomas has done far too much to try and ruin you, but we can’t let him get away with it. Not only that, but I want to see him punished.

“Obviously the law can’t come after him for being improper with me like he has been, but this is something the law *can* do.”

Ray smiled in satisfaction. He had longed for a day when Thomas would be held accountable for all his nasty behaviors and it seemed that day had finally arrived.

No matter how hard the man tried, no matter how much success he’d had in ruining things for Ray, this was the end. He was finally going to suffer the consequences of his actions.

He was finally going to pay for the harm he had caused. And when

this was all over, Ray trusted that he and Cynthia would finally be at peace.

Cynthia was terribly nervous. After telling Ray her good news, they had only had a short time to really enjoy their excitement before they had to come up with a plan for moving forward.

She didn't know if it would work out or if Thomas would catch on.

And if he did figure things out before they were ready, what could she do? It would end up being a terrible fight.

Ray would have to come and rescue her, but then the two men would be forced to battle it out. That was sure to end in blood and Cynthia didn't want to see that.

But Thomas couldn't get away with this, that much was clear. Still, Cynthia wasn't sure what to do now that they had this overwhelming and wonderful evidence to make Thomas pay for what he had done.

Although it wasn't a consequence for how he had tried to drive her and Ray apart, it was something at least.

Moreover, Cynthia trusted that she and Ray would find a way. They would eventually get close enough, take the time to be together, and really know each other.

Things would work out for them. They had to. She was falling in love and she hoped he was doing the same.

And once Thomas was in jail for his thievery, their marriage would

truly have a chance to thrive.

There would be no more competition or strange jealousy, no more irritating conflict that truly didn't matter. She could just enjoy her life with Ray.

"Are you ready?" he asked her, concern in his eyes when he gazed upon her with such lovely affection.

Cynthia looked at him with wide, nervous eyes. He took her hand, the sweetest gesture he had made in quite some time, and smiled gently.

It was the only thing he could possibly have done to bring her any peace, but it still wasn't enough to truly help her relax. Not when there was so much at stake for them.

"I know this isn't going to be easy, but I trust that you can do it, Cynthia. You are strong and brave and more than capable of this," Ray said to her.

But Cynthia didn't feel that way at all. The last thing she felt in that moment was strong or brave. But she had no other choice. She had to do this and there was nothing to stop her now.

"I don't know about all that, but I do know you're right that this has to happen. And I really do think we can make it work.

"I'm sure we'll succeed," she said, trying to convince herself more than Ray.

"I know we can," he replied. "We really can, Cynthia. I have no doubt and you'll see soon enough that it was always supposed to be this way."

"In that case, I suppose I'd better get the horse," Cynthia said.

"She's ready for you."

Ready to push the plan forward, Cynthia mounted the horse and gave Ray one last glance before she set out.

It was important that she reach Thomas's home quickly. She needed him to be exactly where he'd been when she left, but she also needed to give Ray plenty of time.

Arriving at the ranch, Cynthia saw Thomas outside on the porch, staring toward the stable and, more importantly, the barn.

She knew he was distracted; the cattle were bothering him since he hadn't quite managed to deal with them all just yet. Of course, he was probably going to get rid of them as soon as he could.

At last, she dismounted and ran toward him, falling to her knees at the base of the porch steps as Thomas stood and slowly walked down them.

"Thomas, I am so sorry," she cried, trying to work real tears into her eyes. She struggled to do so, but figured he wouldn't even notice. The weight of her emotions was heavy enough as it was.

He had seen her grieving earlier as well and there was no reason to question her now.

"What is it, Cynthia?" he asked, calmly.

"You were right. You were right all along and I tried so hard to deny you, but I just can't anymore," she said in a pleading tone.

Thomas seemed to enjoy this moment, watching her seek his forgiveness and approval. It only made him more detestable.

"What happened?" Thomas asked.

"It's Ray," she said through gritted teeth, hoping Thomas heard the venom she was trying to evoke. "That man abandoned me.

“He cast me out, as if I meant nothing to him at all. He might as well have just thrown all my things out the window because it’s clear I was never important.”

“I know, Cynthia. I understand. He never showed you the kind of care and affection you deserve. I don’t know what he was thinking, but Ray was wrong.

“In so many ways, he was wrong,” Thomas said, shaking his head in dismay.

“But you don’t understand. It’s not only the fact that Ray rejected me. The truth is, I noticed you from the beginning,” Cynthia said, this time forcing herself to blush with shame.

She needed Thomas to think that she was appalled by her own behavior, that she truly did feel terrible for betraying her husband.

“Is that so?” he asked, taking another step closer. Thomas reeked of self-obsession as he drew nearer to her.

“Of course it is. And you know it. I felt something, even that first day, when you told me what kind of a man Ray really is.

“When I saw that you are exactly the sort of man who can take control and make this land what it truly needs to be,” Cynthia said.

Thomas laughed and took Cynthia’s hand, pulling her up to standing. She hated being this close to him, but knew there was no other choice.

This time, at least, she knew that Ray was watching and that he was perfectly aware of what was really happening—he wouldn’t get the wrong idea.

“You see, I was always brought up to be loyal,” Cynthia continued. “And I don’t believe in giving up on people. I married Ray, so I believed I had to stay with him.

“What more could I do? He’s my husband. I’m stuck and I didn’t want to betray him. But to not leave him? That would betray my own heart.”

“You cannot betray yourself, Cynthia. You have to be prudent and it is perfectly clear that the prudent decision is to leave Ray. You must come and stay with me.

“I know you are probably afraid of what the people of the town will think, but there’s no reason to be concerned. I will make sure they understand what happened.

“In fact, I think we can ensure that Ray is the one who pays for his mistakes,” Thomas said.

Cynthia inwardly cringed, but maintained her external calm for the sake of the trap. What she needed now was to convince Thomas to take her inside the house.

“Oh, thank you for understanding. I have been so upset and I worried that I had offended you so much with my stubbornness,” she said, clearing her throat and putting a hand to her neck as if parched.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“Oh, it is just that I’ve been crying so much, I think it took a lot out of me,” she said with a nervous laugh. “I feel so foolish.”

“Nonsense. Come with me,” he said, still holding her other hand and leading her up the porch steps and into the house.

Cynthia took in the sight of the grand home, thinking it far too much for one man to live in. He had walls lined with antlers and weaponry, a way of displaying his accomplishments as well as threatening any who entered.

Suddenly, she grew far more nervous. It wouldn’t take much for Thomas to kill her or Ray, if he wanted to. It would be easy.

“My goodness, your home does not quite have the feminine touch,” she said, giving another awkward laugh.

“You will have to make it your own,” he said, disappearing into what Cynthia presumed must be the kitchen to get her water. She looked at a few paintings that also interspersed the walls, mostly portraits of hunters with their game.

And in that moment, Cynthia realized that all of this had just been another hunt. Only this time, Thomas would be caught in his own trap.

She hoped.

Thomas returned and handed her the cup of water, standing unnervingly close. Cynthia smiled and took a drink of the water, trying not to show her discomfort at being so near to him.

It was terribly strange, being in here and attempting to trick him with her femininity.

“I am so glad you were finally able to see reason,” Thomas said.

“Oh?” she asked.

Thomas leaned forward and it was clear he was planning to kiss Cynthia. In a panic, she gasped and leaned away from him, momentarily forgetting herself.

He pulled back and looked at her with a real anger and, for a moment, she thought she had made a grievous mistake.

But it was too late to take it back and, now, she needed to figure out what to say. Thankfully, it was easy enough, but she hoped he would accept her reasoning.

“You must forgive me,” she said, shyly.

“It’s not that I don’t want to... but I am a married woman. I don’t think I have quite yet reconciled my leaving Ray with the fact that we made a promise of marriage.”

Thomas’s shoulders relaxed and he placed a hand on her arm, a gesture that would have been comforting, had it come from anyone else.

“I understand,” he said. “I will have to be patient, I suppose. But I do ask that you consider your loyalty to me and the fact that you have made the choice to come here and be mine.

“Until we discern the best road to handle the societal aspects of your marriage, we can do what we are able for the sake of your reputation and find a way to let go of Ray.”

“Thank you for being understanding. It is going to be difficult enough, accepting that I abandoned my husband,” she said.

“No, Cynthia. It was Ray who abandoned you. You cannot take the blame for that,” Thomas said, looking at her with insistence.

Cynthia nodded, as if she believed him. It was evident that Thomas appreciated her coy nature, that it was attractive to him.

Something about that made Cynthia even less comfortable, which she hadn’t believed possible.

Shifting closer to the open door to the sitting room, Cynthia handed Thomas her empty cup. She was grateful that the kitchen was to the left of where she stood.

It enabled her to look through the window of the sitting room to the right and see Ray out there with Mark, opening the door of the barn.

She smiled to herself, seeing the two men express silent cheer.

Indeed, they had found Ray’s lost cattle! All of this would be over

soon, she was sure of it. Thomas would *have* to pay the price for what he had done.

She watched the scene a little longer and then noticed when Ray and Mark looked toward the town, a new excitement in their actions as they waved someone closer.

But this time, she could hear them. They were calling for the sheriff.

“What is going on out there? Those men are supposed to be out in the far fields. Have they come back?” Thomas asked, storming down the hall.

It seemed he thought his ranch hands had done something wrong.

Cynthia followed Thomas out the front door, eager to watch how the events would unfold. And the moment they were outside, Thomas’s face drained of color.

“What...?” he asked, trailing off as the sheriff peered inside the barn and confirmed what Anita had gone to him to report.

The sheriff turned and headed straight for Thomas, a grimace set in his face.

“Well, Thomas, how do you explain this?” the sheriff asked.

“Explain what? I have nothing to explain,” Thomas insisted.

“I beg to differ. I see here that you have a couple dozen cattle with the brands of men who have reported thefts to me. First, Ray here, and then three other fellas in town over the next few days.

“What? Did you think it would be too suspicious if you only stole from the man you hate?” the sheriff asked, clearly unaffected by Thomas’s feigned innocence.

“Me? How could you think I would do that? I am no thief!” he

insisted.

“Thomas, I see these cattle right here before my own eyes. I’m no fool. They were stolen and now, here they are. In your own barn.

“How do you explain that if you say you didn’t steal them?” the sheriff asked.

“Maybe it was one of my ranch hands. They can be sneaky men at times,” he said.

“Well, I have a few deputies on their way and they are going to search every barn on your property. Your land is sprawled out in all directions and it could take us all day, but we’re going to find out what happened and it’s best if you just be honest with us,” the sheriff said.

Thomas spluttered and crossed his arms, anger reddening his face as he seethed.

“You want to believe this man?” he asked, pointing to Ray. “Maybe he did it! You know how he hates me. He probably put the cattle in there to make it look like I’m a thief.

“He set a trap for me. Can’t you see that?”

“What I see, Thomas, is a man who is desperate and trying to blame someone else for his own foolish mistake. Now, you get along there. I don’t want to hear anything more from you.

“It’s best you just come quietly and let me tie your hands,” the sheriff said.

“I will not let you take me to jail for this!” Thomas screamed.

“It’s too late for that,” the sheriff said, closing in on Thomas.

But a fight quickly ensued, with Thomas resisting and raising his fists

in an effort to defend himself and stop the sheriff from coming any closer.

From behind Thomas, Ray and Mark lunged forward, grabbing his arms and restraining him so the sheriff could tie his hands together and push him along toward the jail wagon.

“You cannot do this to me!” Thomas shouted. “I will not stand for it! I’m innocent!”

“Enough!” the sheriff shouted.

But Thomas continued his ranting and raving. Just then, Ray came up close to Cynthia and took her by the hand.

“Thank you for helping with that. I know it was probably difficult, trying to distract him the way you did,” he said.

“It was, but it’s all over now and I’m thankful for that,” she said. “Anyway, he is finally getting what he deserves.”

“That’s true,” Ray said. “And not only that, but it’s nice knowing he wasn’t such a great rancher after all.”

“What do you mean?” Mark asked, taking a step closer to them.

“Look at his success! It was only because he was sabotaging the rest of us and selling off our cattle while maintaining his own herd.

“The truth is, he couldn’t have done it without us,” Ray acknowledged.

Cynthia grinned, proud of her husband. He really was the best rancher in town, just as he had wanted to be.

Watching the sheriff haul Thomas off in the wagon was a marvelous end to the terrible day. But at last, it was all over.

And finally, Cynthia felt that her marriage was ready to begin.

It was beautiful, watching Thomas get taken away like that. Ray had long hoped that a day would come when his enemy paid the price for his actions.

While it hadn't come the way Ray anticipated, at least the day was done.

Mark made his way back toward the barn, but Ray had something else to do. It was far more important than looking after the cattle or enjoying the victory over Thomas.

All of that was merely one aspect of what he was feeling now.

Ray took Cynthia's hand and looked into her lovely eyes. He couldn't believe he had ever doubted her, but had a feeling that his days of foolish decisions were far from over.

He had a lot to learn about being a husband, but he made a renewed commitment to try and to listen. He would spend time with her, genuinely, and treat her as the most important thing in his life.

She was far more important than the ranch and it was time she knew it.

After all, this was his last chance to start over. He wouldn't take anything for granted this time and he wouldn't miss out on the joy that was to be had.

“Thank you, Cynthia,” he said, desperately wanting her to understand how much he cared for her.

“It was the right thing to do,” she replied.

“But you did so much. And I didn’t deserve it. None of it. Thank you for everything you did to help me get the cattle back. I promise to never doubt or question you again.

“And I promise I will never leave you behind. I know what I did was wrong,” he said.

Cynthia looked away and he could see the tears welling up in her eyes. Worried that he was only making things worse, Ray clung to her hand and took the other, as well.

She finally looked back at him and he eagerly sought to rectify the matter.

“I didn’t mean to abandon you and I wish I could take that moment back. I wish I had stayed, that I had let you explain.

“I would trade all the cattle in my herd for the chance to show you how much I care about you,” Ray said.

“It’s all right. I know you regret what happened, but I promise you that everything is going to be fine, Ray. We are going to be happy moving forward because we understand one another now,” Cynthia said.

“Yes, we do. And we will be loyal to each other in all things,” Ray said.

“In all things,” Cynthia agreed.

“Thank you for giving me this chance. I won’t waste it this time. I won’t make you regret it,” he said.

“I know you won’t. And I promise I will never keep you in the dark again. Honestly, I gave you a reason to feel jealous and angry.

“You thought I was hiding feelings for Thomas when, in truth, I was just trying to protect you. I should have known you didn’t need protecting.”

“If I hadn’t been such a hothead, you wouldn’t have been worried. After you saw me angry all the time, raging against Thomas, I can understand why you would be worried,” Ray said.

“But I should have trusted you,” Cynthia said with a sigh.

Ray scoffed and shook his head.

“It was me who made that mistake, Cynthia. I was the one who didn’t show trust. You deserve better. It was wrong for me not to give you that,” Ray said.

“We both know better now,” she replied.

Ray agreed, happily. He could hardly believe she was showing him such grace when he had made these mistakes.

After all, he had been the reason for their problems. He had been the one who was always busy and then behaved with suspicion.

“You know,” she began, “I think you are a perfect provider. You are clearly the best rancher in town and I am amazed by how hard you work. Please don’t ever think I don’t appreciate that.”

“I know,” he said. “You’ve made it clear.”

“But I do want more of you. More time with you. I want to get to know you, Ray. Here we are, making commitments to one another, but all I want is to have you in my life.

“A little bit of time each day. A little bit of time to be together.”

“And that time is yours,” Ray said.

He leaned in to kiss Cynthia, but Mark shouted his name and he pulled back.

“What is it?” he asked Mark.

“Oh... sorry. Did I interrupt...?” Mark asked, suddenly nervous as he saw how close Ray and Cynthia were.

“What is it?” Ray repeated with irritation.

“I just thought we should get these cattle back to where they belong. I see four from Old Man Jenkins, six from Mr. Wilbur, and two from Lawrence Spencer,” Mark said, slowly walking toward them.

“All right, we probably should get them all returned,” Ray said, sighing.

Just then, they saw the deputies riding toward them and Ray knew his kiss with Cynthia would have to wait. For the moment, they had to focus on getting the cattle back to their rightful owners.

“Sheriff said you were the one to talk to,” one of the deputies told Ray.

“We found some of mine and three other ranches in this barn, but Thomas has land and barns all over the place,” Ray said.

“That’s what the sheriff said. He also told us to bring in the ranch hands since they most certainly had something to do with this. Have you seen any of them?” the deputy asked.

“We haven’t,” Ray replied.

“Thomas said something about them being out in the far fields,” Cynthia told them. “When he heard you and Mark shouting for the sheriff, he thought it was his men coming back and causing a ruckus.”

“The far fields, huh? Well, I would guess he’s talking about his eastern pastures. That’s a good place to hide some cattle because no one goes out there.

“He might not even have to keep them all cooped up like this if he took them that far. After all, who’s going to see them?” the deputy asked.

“That’s true. We should go take a look because it would be a clever place to hide,” Mark agreed.

With that, the others went to their horses while a few deputies rounded up the cattle that were in the barn.

“Why don’t you head home? Ma will be happy to see you and know that everything has been taken care of.

“I’m sure she’s back home by now after seeing Miss Jessie. She doesn’t know where we’ve all gone to and she will worry,” Ray said.

“I left her a note. I thought you heard me when I told you I would be just a few minutes to leave a note for her,” Cynthia said.

Ray smiled and brushed Cynthia’s hair from her face.

“You are amazing. That was a very good idea. Still, you ought to head back. I don’t want you getting stuck in the middle of all this searching for the cattle.

“You should get home and rest for a while,” he said.

“I can’t leave you to do this on your own, Ray. I want to be with you. I want to help while you all look for the cattle. It’s only right that we do this together,” Cynthia insisted.

“I don’t want anything to happen to you. We’re looking for the ranch hands and we don’t know how they are going to respond to all this. It’s possible that they’re going to try and harm us.

“Please, Cynthia, just head back. I’ll be there soon enough,” Ray said.

But Cynthia stepped close to him again and shook her head. “I can’t, Ray. I can’t leave you.”

“Not even for your own safety?” he asked.

“Not even for that,” she replied.

Ray was utterly torn. His duty was to protect his wife as much as it was to provide for her.

And yet, Cynthia had shown him that she knew how to take care of herself, and it was clear she didn’t want to be separated from him any longer.

The last thing he wanted to do was make it even more difficult.

No, he needed to be with her, as well. It was time for them to head out, alongside one another, and complete their efforts to make Thomas pay, once and for all.

“All right, then,” he said. “Let’s go.”

With that, they joined the others and made their way out to the far fields. Once there, seven ranch hands were rounded up and taken back to town with the sheriff, realizing that they were never again going to see the freedom they’d had while working for Thomas.

It was a marvelous victory, knowing that Thomas’s entire operation was based on lies and cheats. He hadn’t been a good rancher at all.

By the time they finished rounding up the cattle and going along with the deputies to get the rightful owners to come and collect, Ray was exhausted and he figured Cynthia must be, as well.

Along with Mark, they rounded up every last one of the forty-two cattle that had gone missing over the past few months. Leading them

back to the ranch was a satisfying conclusion to the busy day, but there was still one thing left that Ray wanted.

Before he and Cynthia went inside, from where his mother had shouted that dinner was ready, Ray took his wife's hand and drew her near to him at last.

"Thank you again, Cynthia. For everything," Ray said.

"And thank you, Ray. For all you have done for me," she replied.

Without another word, and with only the love in his heart, Ray drew Cynthia into an embrace and flourished it with a kiss.

Epilogue

Two years had passed, but Cynthia felt like it had been only a day. And yet, sometimes it felt like a decade.

It was strange how much had happened and how it felt like the only thing to take place was the growth of her love for her husband.

And for their darling little Jacob.

Cynthia stared out the window at Ray and Mark, busily trying to arrange things so they could move the cattle to a new pasture. Jacob squirmed in her arms and she rocked him, humming a little tune she remembered from her younger years when her father was still alive.

Then, she started singing and adding words to the song, although they weren't the words she had grown up with.

"We don't want to fuss too much right now," she sang.

"Daddy and Mark are busy with the plow. The cattle need to move, and we have nothing else to do, so I'll stand right here and say that I love you."

The three-month-old little boy smiled up at her with large green eyes that resembled his father's. She was thrilled to have all this time to spend with Jacob, but also to introduce him to the people who meant the most to her.

"Are they still busy out there?" Anita asked, shaking her head.

“Of course they are. But it’s all right. I told Ray he needs to come in for lunch today. He knows I have a surprise for him, but he hasn’t guessed what it is yet,” Cynthia said, excitedly.

“That’s wonderful!” Anita said. “And are they still freshening up?”

“And resting. I told them to take their time and I would wake them for lunch,” Cynthia said.

Anita stood beside Cynthia and they watched out the window together, taking in the sight of the men working hard to handle their project and slowly ushering the cattle along.

It was an arduous process, but one that Cynthia found soothing to watch. The slow, gentle motions of such great beasts as they traveled along was interesting.

It was a way Cynthia had come to try and approach life.

She wanted to handle new pastures with slow, gentle motions. Moreover, she wanted to view herself as some kind of a great figure, a creature capable of much, even when others thought she had simply one purpose.

She was more than just a pawn between jealous men or a tool for the sake of ranch growth. Cynthia had proven herself stronger and braver than she ever expected and that gave her great pride.

Since that day when they had seen Thomas taken away, things had changed dramatically between her and Ray. At last, everything had come together.

“It’s so good to see Ray actually enjoying his work instead of being in a constant panic about it,” Anita said with a sigh of happiness.

“I was thinking the same thing. All it took was for him to understand that he didn’t need to beat anyone at anything. He just had to do his best and succeed in his own rights,” Cynthia remarked.

“Certainly. But what I find most marvelous is knowing that he will never again have to rally against Thomas.

“All of the energy he expelled in trying to fight that man and prove himself, it really wasn’t worth it. I think it took all of this for him to see it,” Anita said.

“He won’t have to worry about Thomas ever again. You know, I heard one of his men told the sheriff that Thomas was still hopeful of being released one day, but that he planned to go back to the city if he ever was.

“It’s good to know we don’t need to be concerned at all,” Cynthia said.

“I’m surprised he has any hope at all. Rustling isn’t the sort of thing a man gets released for. It’s a hanging offense and it’s only generosity that stopped him from getting the noose,” Anita said.

“True, but I also think that as much as Ray detests him, he wouldn’t want to see anyone killed,” Cynthia said.

“That’s because he’s my boy and he has a good heart,” Anita said, proudly.

They watched as, with the last of the herd through the new fence, Ray and Mark were finished. They gave each other a nod for a job well done and Ray called out to the other ranch hands that it was time for lunch.

The ten men all seemed to come running. They certainly enjoyed their breaks and Ray gave them freely.

Cynthia was happy as always when Ray came inside and gave her a kiss on the forehead.

“You look as beautiful as can be,” he said to her.

“And you look mighty fine, yourself,” she replied.

“What you look like is well-rested,” Anita interjected. “I can hardly believe that you are coming in for a lunch break. Two years ago, you never would have considered it. So much has changed.”

“It’s only right. Say now, did I see you coming this way on the buckboard with someone earlier?” Ray asked, turning back to Cynthia, who smiled broadly.

Just then, Joyce and David came into the room, looking as though they had just woken up, but were eager to be around others.

“Sorry, were we being too loud?” Anita asked as the other ranch hands came inside, talking away without restraint.

“No, not at all!” Joyce exclaimed.

“Uh...” Ray said, turning to Cynthia with confusion.

“Ray, dear, this is Joyce and David. They’ve come to visit us from Chicago, to see us and meet Jacob,” Cynthia explained. “It was a surprise for you!”

His eyes brightened and he rushed to shake their hands and greet them with warmth and excitement.

“I am so happy to finally meet you both. Cynthia has told me so much about you and I feel as though I already know you. What an honor it is!” he said, looking between the two of them.

“The honor is all ours, Ray. We are thrilled to finally meet you.

“After all this time and all these letters, it’s about time we come here and meet the man who has made Cynthia so happy,” Joyce said.

Ray blushed and it was wonderful for Cynthia to see them all getting along so well. She couldn’t believe this moment had finally arrived, that they were able to get to know one another.

“So you came here this morning?” Ray asked. “I had no idea! How long have you all been planning this?”

“About two months!” Joyce answered.

“We finally got all the details worked out and I was so thrilled when your ma watched Jacob for me this morning so I could go into town and get them,” Cynthia said.

“I really had no idea. I’m so happy about this,” Ray said.

They all enjoyed lunch together, with the ranch hands staying quieter than usual to give Cynthia and Joyce a chance to talk more and share stories from the days gone by.

It was remarkable, spending the time together and remembering things that had happened in what seemed like a different life altogether.

“It’s remarkable. And you decided to move to Chicago to get married, right? That’s when Cynthia came here?” Anita asked.

“Exactly. And I wish my husband could have come for a visit, but he owns a business. Well, a few businesses, actually.

“And it was going to be very hard for him to get away, but he promised that one day, whenever he’s able, he will make the journey to come out here and meet you all,” Joyce said.

“I look forward to that day,” Cynthia said.

Once the meal was over, Ray stood and looked at Mark.

“I trust that you and the fellas can handle the rest of the day without me?” he asked.

“Of course we can. You enjoy a nice day off and we won’t bother you unless it’s an emergency,” Mark said.

With that, Ray suggested they take their guests into town and for Cynthia, who didn't think of them as guests but as family, it was a tremendous idea.

Joyce and David were eager for the chance to walk around for a while and stretch their legs.

"And when we head back, you can see the full property and the ranch," Cynthia said. "But Anita was right, we are a bit low on some of the things we need for feeding extra people.

"And, to be honest, it would be nice if we didn't have to spend all our time cooking when we would rather just enjoy being with you and David."

"I want to learn how to lead one of these," David said to Ray, amazed by the buckboard.

"We can certainly teach you while you're here. You don't use them much in the big city, do you?" Ray asked.

"Not at all. But I don't know another man who can say he knows how to do this, so it would certainly be fun," David replied.

"Come right on over here and I'll let you watch me this time. Maybe on the way back, you can give it a go for a little bit," Ray suggested.

Cynthia was moved, watching Ray and David bond. She and David had been fairly close all those years, but not as close as she was to Joyce.

No one in the world had known Cynthia like Joyce did. At least, not until Ray came along.

"You seem very happy here," Joyce noted.

"I am. I never thought I would find a family that was really mine, but here it is," Cynthia said.

"It broke my heart when we had to say goodbye to you," Joyce confessed.

"I know," Cynthia replied with understanding. "I never held that against you. I understood you needed to go.

"You needed to move on with your life and you had a perfect opportunity to do it. And, in the end, it worked out for me as well."

"I don't know. I think David is going to want to move out here now. Look at him!

"He is just thrilled by this," Joyce said with a laugh, watching David as he observed Ray steering the horse in one direction or another.

"He is welcome to live with us if it means you would come more often to visit," Cynthia teased.

"Oh, how I wish we could! You know, this makes me so happy, just being here with you and seeing you.

"I know things must have been difficult for you, starting over once more and missing out on an adventure that we took without you. But you seem happy," Joyce said.

"I am. I really am. Marrying Ray came with a whole lot of challenges, but once we got through those first couple of months, we figured out how to communicate and how to spend time learning who each other really is.

"It was perfect, you know? He is everything I ever hoped for in a husband and I hope I can be the kind of wife who makes him proud," Cynthia said.

"I'm sure you are. He is a fortunate man," Joyce said.

"No, I'm the lucky one. I'll admit there were times when I wondered what I had done and what kind of man I married. He wasn't always

the most pleasant to be around.

“But once he really showed me who he was? Once he started spending time with me and showing how much he cared? Everything changed then.

“I came to realize that I had never loved anyone or known anyone like I knew Ray,” she said, watching how gently her husband was teaching David and knowing it would be the same with Jacob one day.

“I think that’s how marriage is supposed to be. You give yourself to this one person and they are the only one you can ever see yourself with. No one else matters, not when you have handed your heart to the one and only man you know who will take care of it,” Joyce said.

“Almost there!” Ray called back to them as the town came into view.

It was so much smaller than what Cynthia had seen of Chicago the day she had gone through on the train, but it was a town she was proud of.

They made their way to the livery stables and left the buckboard there so they would be able to wander through the town and show David and Joyce everything that made the community what it was to them.

“And we really do like going there. It’s a nice little inn.

“Of course, there’s not usually much of a reason to eat anywhere other than home, but we have found that since having Jacob, we need a bit of time to ourselves now and then,” Cynthia said.

“Anita watches him for you?” Joyce asked.

“She sure does. And I’m thankful for it, too,” Ray added.

“It seems like you have a really wonderful mother and I’m looking forward to getting to know her better,” Joyce said.

“You two will be good friends,” Cynthia said. “I can tell.”

Of course, much of this was simply what Cynthia was hoping for. She knew life had taken a strange turn for them, but she still felt certain there were good things ahead.

Whatever those things would be, she longed to see the family she had once in the past and the family she had now grow closer to one another.

“Should we stop by the bakery to get some bread for tonight’s dinner?” Ray asked.

Cynthia smiled, thinking back to a day, many years ago, when she had wanted to go to a bakery.

Linda May and Nathan were heading out and Linda May had insisted that she couldn’t take Cynthia along, that Cynthia had to stay with Joyce.

It was many years ago, but Cynthia could still feel the pain of a young girl who didn’t know why she was facing so much rejection. All she’d longed for was a chance to be with family.

Her father had just died and Linda May was the only family she’d had.

But Cynthia had been wrong. She’d had Joyce. And somewhere out there in the world, without her even realizing it, she had Ray.

Her days in Connecticut had long ago come to an end and this new beginning was unexpected, but this was her life now. And this was what made her happy.

Everything Cynthia had ever wanted—love, family, and a place to call home—she had found with Ray in Montana.

Extended Epilogue

The train came to a stop right in front of Cynthia. Jacob stood beside her and she held his chubby little hand.

He looked up at her with those big green eyes, as if wondering what they were doing there.

“She’s going to be shocked by how much he has grown!” Anita exclaimed.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Cynthia said with a laugh.

At last, the doors opened and Joyce came down the stairs with a bag in her hand. Leah, her niece, came along behind her, smiling brightly and flicking her long, blonde hair over her shoulder.

She was maybe two or three years younger than Cynthia, but she had the youthful appearance of a woman who had never borne children and Cynthia grinned fondly, remembering what it was like to be so vibrant.

“Cynthia!” Joyce exclaimed, throwing her arms around Cynthia and embracing her.

But before Cynthia could say another word, Joyce let go and turned her full attention to Jacob, whom she scooped up in her arms.

He laughed, but looked back at Cynthia as if to ask if this was all right.

“You remember Miss Joyce?” she asked, although it had been nearly two years since Joyce had visited last and Jacob had been an infant.

“Mish Joysh?” he asked, turning back to Joyce.

“Oh, you are such a little charmer!” Joyce exclaimed. “And this is Leah, my niece.”

“So lovely to finally meet you,” Cynthia said, embracing her warmly.

Anita immediately followed suit.

“It is wonderful to meet you all, as well. Aunt Joyce has told me time and time again about you both. Cynthia, she always mentioned you, even in her letters before coming to Chicago.

“And Anita, since she met you a few years ago, I know she considers you a very dear friend. I feel at home here already,” Leah said, truly appearing as though she was comfortable with them.

“We were happy to hear that you wanted to come out here and see the ranch and everything,” Cynthia said.

“The way my aunt spoke about it, everything sounds so beautiful and peaceful. I was raised in Chicago, but my heart has always longed for something quieter.

“I think I will truly like being here. It isn’t like anywhere else I’ve ever been,” she said.

“Honestly, there is nowhere in the world like Montana,” Cynthia replied. “But you’ll see that soon enough.”

They made their way back to the ranch, where Ray and Mark were busily making plans for the year ahead, determining what goals they needed to achieve for the sake of growing and building a better place for them to thrive.

Cynthia led Leah and Joyce inside, with Anita coming along behind them.

Seeing the two men at the table, Cynthia was relieved that she had an excuse to interrupt. Anything was worthwhile if it meant she could get Ray’s attention and spend some time with him.

“They’re here!” he exclaimed, looking up and coming over to greet Joyce and meet Leah. Mark followed close behind and his eyes grew wide when he saw Leah.

“Mark, Ray, this is Leah. You both know Joyce already,” Cynthia said, making introductions as they all greeted one another.

It became clear at once that Leah noticed Mark as well as Mark noticed Leah, and Cynthia gave Ray a knowing look. She was delighted that there appeared to be a spark between them as Mark welcomed her to sit down, while Joyce and Anita started their own conversation.

“Philip is coming over for dinner tonight,” Ray said.

“Oh, that’s wonderful! Joyce will be excited to meet him,” Cynthia said.

“I think he’s planning to propose to Ma any day now. Honestly, I’m shocked he hasn’t already done so,” Ray said with a laugh.

“Me too. But it will be grand to see her so happy, living her life with a man who truly loves her. I hope he appreciates her as well as she deserves,” Cynthia said.

The day was spent with excitement and happiness, seeing how everyone came together and got to know one another. Cynthia had never expected this type of unity in her life, but she was thrilled to have it now and to see how close the people she loved had become.

There had been a time in life when she’d thought she would always be alone, but those days were in the past and a new day had dawned.

When Philip arrived, he brought flowers for all the women, handing the largest bouquet to Anita and then a single, lovely calendula flower each to Cynthia, Leah, and Joyce.

“I hope you ladies aren’t offended,” he said. “It’s just that I have to be sure my favorite woman gets the most beautiful of them all.”

Cynthia placed a hand on his shoulder in approval.

“We are more than happy to sacrifice our own bouquets to ensure Anita gets hers,” she said.

Joyce chatted away with Philip, promising that her husband would come next time. Cynthia truly hoped he would. After all, she still hadn’t had the opportunity to meet him.

Joyce shared how David was now working for him and life was good in Chicago, but when Cynthia had a chance to get to know Leah better, she could see that the big city wasn’t what everyone wanted.

“I love it there, of course. It’s home,” she said.

“But you say that with hesitancy,” Cynthia pointed out.

“I suppose the truth is that I meant what I said earlier. I would like a quiet life. The city is just too much for me, sometimes.

“It would be nice to live out here and learn to garden and watch the animals, to enjoy the peace and calm. Aunt Joyce told me you didn’t know anything about living on a ranch before you came here and that you learned it all after arriving,” Leah said.

“It’s true. Joyce had planted a few things outside our home in Connecticut, but nothing like this. I learned through many mistakes how to do all of that.

“And I would love to have some help from you tomorrow in the garden. I can show you how to do a few things and see if you like it.

“You never know, it’s possible you could really enjoy this life after all,” Cynthia said.

“That would be amazing! Thank you!” she exclaimed.

“Of course. It’s my pleasure. And if you really think you would be happy out here, would your mother be willing to let you make this journey? To stay, I mean?” Cynthia asked.

“She would be terribly nervous, but she wants me to be happy. She knew that sending me out here with Aunt Joyce came with the risk that I would never want to go back,” Leah acknowledged.

“Well, that’s good at least. She won’t be too surprised if you decide this is where you want to be,” Cynthia said.

“I also know that she wants me to marry. Since I don’t really care for any of the pretty boys in the city, maybe she will give me a chance to find a country boy,” Leah said with a trill of delight.

“It seems to me that if you want a country boy, there’s already one who would make himself available,” Cynthia said. “Don’t think I didn’t notice how well you two got along already.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I mean, why would he have any care for me at all?

“He’s so handsome and strong and successful,” Leah said, clearly swooning as she peered out the window where Mark was helping some of the other men with a few tasks.

“Mark is an excellent fella and I think he would make a fine husband. Ray and I have been hoping for a while that he would find someone, but no one seems to have interested him... until now, that is,” Cynthia said.

She smiled at Leah, who smiled back shyly and looked away. That look of young love struck Cynthia, who remembered what it felt like when she first met Ray.

In those first few days, she had been so interested in him. But that was before things began to become strange and difficult.

And in the weeks that followed, they’d had many struggles to overcome before she was finally able to rest in the love she felt and they grew closer and had been growing together ever since.

As the dinner celebration came to a conclusion, Cynthia stood and raised her cup in a toast.

“I want to thank every one of you for the ways you have been so wonderfully present in our lives. As for me, I have lived a strange, difficult life at times, but Joyce was the one who ensured I knew I was loved and then, once I arrived in Montana, Ray and Anita took on that role,” she said.

“I am so thankful to know you all. I am glad to meet you, Leah, and I hope you will spend much more time here.

“Mark, you know that you have been an incredible friend, not only to Ray but also to me. Philip, we are so glad that you are here in our life as well and I know how happy you make Anita.

“Of course, my sweet Jacob has just gone down to sleep, but you all know how dear he is to me as well. And, in that light, I do believe Ray and I would like to share with you all a bit of other news,” Cynthia said, holding her breath in anticipation.

Ray took her other hand and gave it a comforting squeeze.

“It looks as though Jacob is soon to be a brother!” she finally said.

“Oh!” Anita and Joyce gasped in unison, their mutual delight another joy upon all the others.

Cynthia had struggled not to tell anyone sooner, but she and Ray had agreed that it was best to wait until Joyce was there in person. At last, she was able to share this excitement and look ahead to the coming of her second child.

“We are so happy for you,” Philip said.

“How exciting!” Leah exclaimed.

“We are very happy,” Cynthia added, looking around the table once

more at the faces who made her the woman she was.

Once Philip and Mark had gone home and Anita, Joyce, and Leah had all gone off to bed, Cynthia and Ray made their way outside together.

It was late, but the sun was still making its descent and they looked out upon the horizon to watch it disappear. From the pinks and oranges to the periwinkles and indigos, the sky shifted and began to reveal a masterpiece of stars overhead.

"I am thrilled that we were finally able to tell everyone about the baby," Ray said.

"Me too. It was so hard not sharing it with your mother.

"I was worried she would hear me at times when I wasn't feeling so well," Cynthia said, thinking back to the day before when her nausea had been quite dreadful.

"Well, it's all out in the open now. Jacob will be so happy when the time is closer and he realizes what's happening," Ray said.

"I don't know about that. He will miss having all our attention," she said.

"True, I suppose," he replied.

They gazed out at the beauty beyond them, the vast and open space that echoed their own bliss.

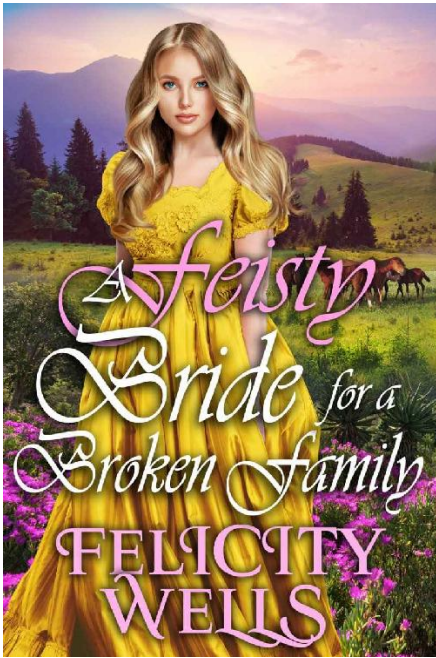
There had been struggles and trials at every turn of their marriage, but things had still managed to turn out like this. It was ideal, as close to perfect as Cynthia had ever thought her life would be.

"I love you, Cynthia," Ray said, turning to her and gazing at her with all the affection in his heart.

"And I love you, Ray," she replied, feeling it well up within her.

Without another word, Ray leaned in close and kissed her lips with the promise that their happiness was only just beginning.

A Feisty Bride For A Broken Family



Chapter 1

Mornings were never good, not anymore. The walk to work felt long and Annie was going to spend the entire day on her feet.

It was always that way. The world was a tough place when you remembered living in a better time.

Her body sagged as the first few raindrops hit her. It was so hard to stay pleasant.

No one had any obligation to her or her family, and she was grateful that she had been able to get a job.

She sighed as she walked by a small café. It was the kind of place she would have passed without noticing in her previous life, a little family place on the edge of the industrial district of Boston.

She had never been to this part of town before her family had lost everything. Now she was there every single day. It was still a little bit like walking in a strange dystopia.

Annie shook her head. She knew this line of thinking wouldn't get her anywhere.

It was a hard life, but it was life. She had to be grateful for that. After everything, at least they were still alive.

The small restaurant had large glass windows and a warm light spilled out. Inside, right next to the window, was a young family.

They seemed to be happy. The child wasn't old enough to be in school yet, and she seemed cheerful.

The world on the other side of that window was so strange.

She stopped and stared, watching as the daughter laughed and ate her breakfast.

Annie's mind made up the conversation that they were having, talking about all the happy moments they had shared together—happy moments playing and laughing and having a great time.

She sighed, trying to make herself turn away from the sight that filled her vision, but it was so hard. The little girl reminded Annie of herself, a blonde child with more hope than she could contain in her body.

Annie sent up a small prayer that the child would never have her heart broken by life. The girl deserved better than that. Everyone deserved better than that.

She imagined they were planning a trip to a nearby park. Annie wished she could go with them and enjoy some laughter and happiness.

She used to be able to laugh like that. It was such a strong memory that it nearly brought her to tears.

She didn't have that anymore, but when she was a young girl, her parents had that sort of joy on their faces. They used to go out to breakfast and laugh around a table, loving each other.

She remembered being happy, bouncing around in a house that old money had bought. But they had lost so much.

They were on the right side of the war, but it didn't stop their finances from being devastated by the not-so-civil engagements that nearly tore the country apart.

She sighed, dreaming of a different world, a place where things would be different.

She couldn't make the world better for herself. All she could do was work and try to make sure that her family didn't lose anything more.

Her golden hair was pulled up, braided, and wrapped around her head. Her brown eyes tore away from the window, focusing instead on the path ahead of her.

Her shift at the factory wouldn't wait for her to remember times she would never get back. Lateness was not appreciated and she needed every second of work she could find.

Her family wasn't rich anymore. She didn't have the luxury to sleep in or enjoy small moments like meals with her family.

Her family didn't do those sorts of things anymore. Her father and mother had become shells of who they once were.

It was a sad state of affairs. That was what everyone had said when her family fell from grace. Her name didn't have the value that it had had before.

She shivered, knowing her father would only just be making his way home from the local tavern. The man had taken to drinking heavily since the family had fallen apart.

It was a nightly occurrence. She had left an hour before dawn that morning, and her father still hadn't returned.

She only knew that she heard her father returning sometimes as she was waking, and sometimes a little later.

He had given himself over to the torment of memories that he couldn't let go of.

She had almost fallen into the same life. Her world had been fancy

parties and dancing with boys, but everything had changed.

Fortunes could be lost so quickly. It had happened in a flash. She had gone from riches to rags, from fancy parties to working in a factory.

She turned the corner. Smog filled the air. These factories made it hard to breathe anymore.

She hated being in this part of town, but it wasn't something she could avoid. She had to come here, coughing softly as she walked into the door of the building.

The front room was filled with several tables and lockers where workers could stow their belongings. She didn't carry much with her, so there was nothing she had to drop off.

A woman stood at the other end of the room, right next to the door. Annie shared a moment of exhausted silence with the woman who took down the time that she arrived.

Nothing had to be said. They both knew why they were there and nobody had much use for chatting at the start of a long sweaty workday.

She took her station without another word, loading things into the machine to be formed. Steam poured around her.

It was mindless work and the only way to get her mind off of the miserable conditions was to lose herself in her own thoughts.

The thoughts were comforting. All Annie could think about was the life she used to have.

She daydreamed about the times before, something her mother had warned her never to do. They had told her there wasn't anything that could be done to get that back, so there was no use in dwelling on it.

But she knew her mother still tortured herself about the past. Annie

had seen her mother barricade herself into a room and not come out for days.

Her mother was dying under the weight of their downfall, but it wasn't something a doctor could fix. Rather, the woman's mind had broken.

Annie had been trying to help, but she just couldn't. She didn't know what to do besides trying to keep her life from spiraling more out of control than it already was.

Her parents certainly weren't in control of their own actions, not anymore. They were falling apart, barely people.

She was the one that did all the work, just trying to make sure there was enough money in the house for the family to eat. It was exhausting.

But this was her life now. Annie simply had to accept the truth. It wasn't going to get better or change. She would never again have the life she'd had before.

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A Thank You To My Reader

Dear Reader,

First of all, I would like to thank you for taking some of your precious time to read my book.

It is such an honor to be able to share my stories with you.

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With Gratitude,

Felicity.